

Regional Development Issue in Indian History throughout the Ages

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The primary objective of the present paper is to highlight the issue of the regional development in Indian History throughout the ages i.e. from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial phases. Needless to say, the span of the pre-colonial phase is vast and elastic. It will encompass even the Maurya-Gupta Imperial duo's times, because without these first two imperial ruling dynasties, the present discussion will remain incomplete.

The basic pattern of development issue in Indian History throughout the ages except the Maurya and Gupta imperial phases was uneven and unbalanced. This unevenness was and is very much visible even today in the different regions of the country. It is not that this uneven or unbalanced development system was confined in the frontier region or a region far away from the capital or economically barren only. The uneven regional development issue is really complex as well as sensitive one in this multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-linguistic and multi-ethnic mosaic of the Indian sub-- continent. India's experiences of the regional development are unique and unprecedented in the annals of development of the world. Because India's diversity is unparalleled and it cannot be compared with any country not even with China. It is in this historical backdrop, I would like to examine the issue in the regional perspective which is the focal point of the present write-up.

II

The unbalanced regional development is a chronic problem in most parts of India but the case of North Bengal and North East India is proverbial. A glaring example is the pre-merger and the post-merger Cooch Behar. To tackle the case of North Bengal, the West Bengal Government has set-up a separate board for development known as the *Uttar Banga Unnayan Parshad* and the Union Government of India has set-up a

separate secretariat for the North-East states. It is the hard proof of the unbalanced regional development. The examples can be multiplied. But for the convenience of the constructive discussion, I would like to confine it to North Bengal and North-East India in particular.

III

The Bengali lexicographical meaning of the English vocabulary "Region" is 'Anchal'. It comes from the earthy and colloquial Bengali word 'Aachal'. However, the connotation of the present English vocabulary 'Region' is different in many respects from the Bengali word 'Anchal'. The region may be a conglomeration of heterogeneous or homogenous areas. There is no unified or cohesive character of the region at least in North Bengal and North East India. Obviously, the sub-region issue cannot be excluded from the discussion canvas of the present discourse.

IV

Conceptually region and regional development issue is the direct product of the Merchant-Colonial-Imperial Rule. In the pre-colonial phase the centre versus region question did not arise because the central power was absolute and centralized. The emperor or the king was at the apex of the power-centre. Naturally, no body raised any question on the paradigm of the development. But what was interesting is that the first Imperial Ruling Dynasty - the Mauryan rulers were very much aware of the regional development issue. The classic example was the construction of the Sudarshan Lake at Junagadh (presently in Gujrat-Rajasthan border area) for water supply and irrigation. The *Danda Samata* and the *Danda Manyata* codes were also the illustrations of the balanced development plan. Both Chandragupta Maurya and Chanakya were well acquainted with the diversity of the Empire. Subsequently, the Imperial Guptas had toed in the lines of the Mauryas with modifications. This balanced development system had been continued up to the time of Harshavardhana, the last Indian Empire builder of the Aryavarta Region. However, after the demise of Harshavardhana, we do not find

any Imperial ruling dynasty in the Indian sub-continent. This vacuum unconsciously had given the birth to regional identity question. It was very much visible in the field of language. Had India been governed by an Imperial dynasty, the multilingual environment would not have come into picture because a strong and centralized government could not promote the cause of multilingualism. Unilingualism is the creed of the centralized state or the Dynastic Rule. For example we can mention the case of China. The Manchu Dynasty, though not capable of preserving the territorial integrity of China, acted as a symbol of unity. So, despite the advent of the warlords (which were also Chinese) the Chinese people felt the necessity of a kind of unity.

The regional identity in India was further cemented by the local languages. It was acted in two-ways. First, the foreign rulers who had settled here patronized and espoused the cause of the local languages rather than the holy language (Sanskrit) or the court language of the pre-Muslim India. This promotion of the regional or local language in the long run led to the birth of the regional identity. Secondly, the Bhakti movement of the 15th and 16th centuries also promoted the cause of the regional or local language because all the preachers of the Bhakti movements preached their social and religious doctrine through the spoken language of the people. For example, Srimant Shankar Deb of Assam preached in Assamese, Sri Chaitanya Dev in Bengali, Ramdas in Marathi and Vasaveshwara in Telegu languages. This, in the long run, had given the birth to the Assamese, Marathi and Telegu identity. At the outset, it was confined to the language and culture. However, with the passage of time particularly after the introduction of the democratic elements, the regional development question was cropping up in an embryonic form. What is interesting was that the Colonial administrations of the three Presidencies - Bengal, Bombay and Madras had entered into a long-drawn conflict in regard to the regional economic development, service opportunity and other subsidiary issues. I am presenting here a specific example of such conflict.

After the introduction of the I.C.S. examination system for the recruitment of the civilian for India, it was found that among the successful candidates, the percentage

of the Bengalis was much high. The students of the other regions could not succeed much. Naturally, resentment was growing in the other regions of India. In order to meet their grievances, the government of the Madras presidency had suggested that the recruitment for the I.C.S. cadre should be based on region. A bit interesting argument because the cause of the regional voice was uttered from the mouth of the colonial-imperial administrators. Like the caste system, the regional identity i.e. regional development issue was so deep rooted that the colonial-foreign administrators were divided among themselves. They became the champion of region and regional issue of the Colonial India. This was really a matter of serious study and analysis. It was not an American type of regional rupture i.e. South versus North. It was something more than American regionalism or Chinese regionalism. Was it only a Colonial device of divide and rule? It is very difficult to get the answer straight way without proper historical evidences. The issue is so serious that any sweeping or passing comment will not help us to get the appropriate answer. Let us study the issue from other perspectives.

History suggests us that unbalanced regional development is the direct offshoot of the colonial-administrative and economic system. Accepting this dictum, we want to say that the case of India and Indonesia is unique one. We found close similarity between the unbalanced regional development of the Dutch East Indies i.e. Indonesia and the British East Indies i.e. India. Both were colonial powers. But there was a difference between the British colonialism and the Dutch colonialism in practice, though theoretically both had the same kind of background. Geographically and to some extent historically, the past of India and Indonesia is identical. Indonesia was consisted roughly of 227 islands with multi-religious profile despite the predominance of the Muslims. A serious conflict was started between the province of Aceh and the province of Java immediately after the independence. Prof. Nur-uddin, the leader of the secessionist movement of Aceh, has complained that the oil, coal and other mineral resources of Aceh was used for the industrial development of Java. The seeds of this unseen regional development were sown by the Dutch Colonial Government. It is actually a colonial legacy. And even today Indonesia has been suffering from such colonial hangover.

India on the other hand was consisted of 563 princely states and twelve British Indian provinces on the eve of the independence. It is true that the movement of the Colonial-Imperial rulers had brought the sub-continent under one political umbrella with two broad political administrative structures - the British India and the princely India. Again in British India there was no unitary system of administration. For example, we can mention the names of the multifarious administrative structures such as Non-Regulation, Scheduled District Act, Excluded Area Act, partially Excluded Area Act, Inner line Regulation etc. Such type of various administrative devices had given the birth to the unbalanced regional development issue because for each administrative unit, the Colonial-Imperial Government had introduced a special type of development model. A pertinent question has been raised by the post-colonial historians and the social scientists. The question is why the different types of administrative structures were introduced by the Merchant-Colonial-Imperial power. The stereotype answer is that the Merchant-Colonial power's ulterior motive was to implant the policy of *divide et empera* i.e. Divide and Rule. It is partially true, but not wholly. The post-colonial scholars have presented a new view on the British mindset. The early Merchant-Colonial administrators had firmly believed that India was a mere geographical expression. It is, in practice, a conglomeration of the different regions under one roof. Eminent British statesmen, Sir Winston Churchill once told - 'India is a geographical expression. It is more a united nation than the Equator'. The comment of Churchill was a reflection of his misunderstanding of the underlying unity of the Spiritual India. India may be compared with the ancient Greece, Athens, Sparta, Corinth, etc. The administration, the rituals and above all the king was different in each city state. Still, there was an undivided Greek mentality among the citizens of the city-states because the religion, gods and goddesses, language, myths and finally the culture were one. However, the much-talked, much-discussed and much-used hackneyed phrase 'Unity in Diversity' was used indiscriminately by the Merchant-Colonial think-tank. This 'Unity in Diversity'

dictum had greatly influenced merchants-colonial administrators to introduce various administrative frames and development models for Colonial India.

However, we can precisely mention the case of the introduction of the Railways in the Khashi-Garo-Jaintia Hills. In order to save the tribal identity in the form of language, religion and culture, the Colonial Government did not like migration or settlement of the non-tribals in the tribal regions. If they introduced rail, they could not check the migration of the advanced plain people. Even today, the Meghalaya tribals do not like the introduction of the Railways in their homeland. As a result the pace of the economic development of Colonial and Post-Colonial Meghalaya is very slow. At the outset the Colonial Government's policy of segregation and in the post-colonial phase the schizophrenic attitude of the tribal people of Meghalaya, in practice, has retarded the process of development. The North East as well as the part of the Northern Bengal is the classic examples of this paradigm of development.

However, the Colonial Governments policy towards the tribals was not uniform. On the contrary, we found dichotomy in the policy of the Government. For example, the Colonial Government had introduced the railway lines in the first phase in the ferocious tribal infested places of the North Western part of India such as Dera Ismail Khan, Dera Ghazi Khan, Dera Bugti, Jamrud etc. This railway line was economically not viable. Still, the British Colonial Government had patronized the cause of the railway lines whereas they did not introduce the railway lines in the Khashi-Jaintia-Garo Hills region. Apart from this, the tribal people of the North East had become the Britisher's religious brothers. The most of the tribals had embraced Christianity. The tribals of the North Western part of India, on the other hand, were the followers of Islam and did not like the British domination. As a result of different reasons, the tribals of the two regions could not come in the broader spectrum of development.

The merchant-cum-colonial adventurers had entered India through the oceanic routes. The time, when they had settled in this part of the globe, is regarded by the historians as the 'Oceanic Age'. The advent of the 'Oceanic Age' had a far-reaching

impact upon India because in the pre-oceanic age, India's development center or region or mart was concentrated in the heartland of India. It is true that the maritime region was also there. However, the land-regions received much more attention with the advent of the oceanic merchants' power in India. We found that the maritime regions were developed tremendously. In fact, the early phase of the merchant-colonial powers' expansion was confined to the coastal belt of India - a new paradigm of development. Calcutta, Bombay and Madras came to be the new nodal centers of the merchants-colonial powers' political, commercial and administrative expansion. So, a new trend was emerged in the practice of development of the coastal region. The classic example was Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, Goa, Pondicherry, etc. These new centers had never been the centers of importance either as trade or politics or administration in the history of the sub-continent. However, the merchant--colonial powers of Europe had concentrated in the oceanic region. For example, in Bengal area the Hooghly-Ganga river basin was developed as the most flourishing center of trade-cum-commerce-cum-administration. It was an unprecedented event in the history of the world that all the leading-maritime-cum-commercial powers of the contemporary world - the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French, the Danish, the Armenians and the English - had settled in and around the Hoogly-Ganga-Bhagirathi riverine-region. In the initial phase it was a commercial hub, but with the passage of time it became the commerce-cum--industry-cum-administration-cum-cultural hubs of the country. As a result, a new paradigm was emerged in the field of development. The inland region could not receive much attention of the merchant-colonial powers. Though it is true that the inland region was brought under their control in the later phase, it finally emerged as the immediate cause of the unbalanced regional development, a worst feature of the merchant-colonial powers' development policy. This Colonial legacy of the unbalanced regional development had given the birth to coastal versus land feud in the Colonial period and core versus periphery and center versus margin tug of war in the post-Colonial period.

The coastal versus land feud had another pernicious effect on the regional development question. The coastal belt area was selected for the growth of the modern

industries despite the non-availability of the raw materials. For example, the jute industry was developed in and around Calcutta and Howrah, but the jute-producing areas were located in the East and North Bengal region. This colonial hangover is very much visible even after the sixty years of the de-colonization of India.

The Merchant-Colonial-Imperial ruler's innovation of the 'Martial Race Theory' was another factor, which was responsible for unbalanced regional development. It was actually invented after the last Anglo-Sikh war (1849), though it was implemented in the soil after the great political upheaval of 1857-1858. Since then Punjab had enjoyed the 'Most-Favoured Province' status. Apart from the Punjab, the Western part of the United Provinces (presently Hariyana and Western Uttar Pradesh) was the largest beneficiaries of the Martial Race Theory. As because it was an agricultural zone, the Merchant-Colonial Government had extended the facilities of irrigation, farming and fertilizer to these regions. In fact, the largest irrigation network in the world was built-up in this region by the merchant-colonial rulers. This had given the birth to a prosperous Agricultural class in the Punjab and the Western Uttar Pradesh cutting across the religious lines. This prosperous Agricultural class had also formed a political party composed by the Hindu, Sikh and Muslim peasants known as the Unionist Party on the basis of agricultural development solidarity. Even in the hey-day of communal-tension in 1946, the Unionist Party of the Punjab had retained their class unity and agricultural solidarity. The communal solidarity did not succeed to break the agricultural solidarity.

The change as well as continuity of history and geography is another important factor to be reckoned to locate the cause of the unbalanced regional development. It is true that the geography is never changed. It is nature's creation. But due to the change of history, the geographical importance of the region is changed. The change may be positive or negative. For example, due to the partition of the country, nay Bengal, in 1947 Haldibari, a trade mart of the Princely state of Cooch Behar, had lost its commercial importance particularly in respect of jute trade. Before the partition special jute train was introduced between Haldibari and Calcutta. Same is the case of Kalimpong of present Darjeeling District. Since time immemorial, Kalimpong had been the important

commercial hub between Tibet and the plains of Bengal. This position of Kalimpong had been continued up to the out-break of the Sino-Indian conflict in 1962. After the Sino-Indian imbroglio, Kalimpong had lost her former glamour as an international trade center. So despite geographical location, Kalimpong had lost her former status in the sphere of trade and commerce due to the historical phenomenon. On the other hand, due to the partition and afterwards due to the Sino-Indian conflict in 1962, Siliguri, a sleepy foothills village of the pre-partition days, is turning into the most vibrant and international commercial hub of West Bengal, nay, India.

The development patterns of the Princely states and the British Indian provinces or States was also uneven. This unevenness was distinctively visible in the field of education, agriculture and other spheres. If any researcher of the post-colonial India carefully observes the centers of discontent, he will find that the most of the centers were formerly the Princely states. This is very much true in the Princely states of the North East India i.e. Cooch Behar, Tripura and Manipur. The same is the case of Vidharbha and Telengana. They are formerly a part of the Princely states. All these formerly princely states are agitating for the creation of the separate states on the pretext of the unbalanced regional development.

The lack of talent power is also an important cause of the unbalanced regional development. Despite the abundance of the natural resources, the Arab countries, the African countries and the North Eastern part of India including North Bengal, became the victims of the non-availability of the talented power. On the other hand, Israel with her constraint of natural resources has developed her economy with the help of talent power. Prof. B. D. Bhattacharjee, Vice-chancellor of the Jawharlal Nehru University, has rightly explained the rôle of talent power in the development of Israel.

In the last phase of my discussion I am coming to the question of the unbalanced regional development in the Hindu Nepal and the Islamic Pakistan. I consciously used the terminology Hindu and Islamic in the prefix of Nepal and Pakistan. The separation of the East Pakistan from the mainstream Pakistan is another classic example of unbalanced regional development. In Nepal, the same kind of problem has originated.

The unbalanced development between the Kathmandu valley and the Nepal Terai has triggered the present day violent agitation in the Terai region.

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