

## *Heritage*

# **REGIONALISM AND POLITICS OF IDENTITY : A STORY OF JHARKHAND**

**Dr. Siuli Mukherjee**

*Assistant Professor, Dept. of Political Science, Bethune College*

Regionalism is a process of self-determination on linguistic, religious or ethnic lines which challenges the sovereignty of a country and hinders its path of nation-building. But even before understanding the process, let us take an insight about what do we mean by a region? The Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences defines a region as “a homogenous area with physical and cultural characteristics distinct from those of neighbouring areas. As part of a national domain, region is sufficiently unified to have a consciousness of its customs and ideas and thus possesses a sense of identity distinct from the rest of the country. Therefore region is conceived as having both territorial reference as well as reference to socio-cultural and psychological consciousness.<sup>1</sup> Actually, the core of regionalism is the profound sense of identity that prevails. There is a widely shared sentiment of togetherness and a we-feeling in the mind of the people which often reinforces a sense of separateness from others. This kind of feeling comes spontaneously from within and is not influenced and imposed from any external agency. Therefore, precisely what we can say is that regionalism refers to an ideology which is primarily based on the awareness of linguistic, religious, ethnic and cultural identity of a particular geographical region. As an ideology and political phenomenon pregnant with the potentiality to develop into social and political movements, regionalism has drawn the attention of scholars and professionals no doubt because of its polemical character.<sup>2</sup> It is the ‘we-they’ factor that guides this sentiment and ventilate its emotions in a volcanic manner. Another factor that contributes to aggravate the situation is the activities of the traditional elites, class and caste groups who by their hegemonic attitude proclaim their sense of superiority and engulf the psychological space of the non-elites and marginalized so as to push them to the periphery. However, this type of regionalism is not restricted to any geographical territory and has a spill-over effect. If the fire of regionalism catches in one area, it is likely to catch the attention and support of the people of the adjacent areas if they too suffer from similar shades of problems. The ethnic groups might think that they are not getting their due share of the financial resources of the country. This led to the growth of political sub-cultures which often clash with the dominating political culture. This might take different forms in different areas like regionalism demanding more autonomy and power, separate statehood, secession from Indian Union etc. India is facing different shades of regionalism today. A case study of the creation of a new state Jharkhand in the Indian map would help us in understanding the concept of regionalism in reality.

## **II**

In India, we have seen a great deal of democratic churning in the post 1990s which has reconfigured the politics and economy of various regions in a very significant way. The politics of identity which has found its expression in different part of the country bears the testimony of the fact. However, Regionalism is not something which has suddenly appeared in the Indian horizon. It is the product of long historical evolution. The history of neglect and deprivation had resulted in the assertiveness and conflicting claims of the marginalized to place their demand on the lines of region, religion, language, caste, community. The demand thus get articulated, politicized and expressed in the form of regionalism. There are growths of linguistic movements, movements for a separate state, sub-regional movement, ethnic movement all over the world and India is not an exception to it. Rajni Kothari argues that democracy in India has become a playground for growing corruption, criminalisation, repression and intimidation of large masses of people. The role of the state in ‘social transformation’ has been undermined. It is more so under neo-liberal economy imposed by the First World. People have started asserting their rights through various struggles.<sup>3</sup> It is after all the age of ‘new social movements’ which focuses on the human aspect of issues like human rights, tribal development and empowerment unlike the traditional ones which used to focus on the materialistic aspect of life. However, this paper will focus on the rise and politics of identity as an impact of regionalism with the birth of 28th state in our country’s federal framework. Jharkhand is a state in eastern India which was born with 18 districts from the southern part of Bihar on Nov 15, 2000. The name Jharkhand means ‘the land of forests’. It shares its borders with the state of Bihar, UP, Chattisgarh, Orissa and West Bengal. It evolved after half a century of people’s movement to evolve a Jharkhandi identity. Following the separation of Chattisgarh from Madhya Pradesh and Uttaranchal (now Uttarkhand) from Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand finally became independent from Bihar in November 2000. Scholars have argued that separation was granted on the

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basis of expediency and opportunism, rather than because of the long history of struggles from within the state or genuine concerns for the democratic and developmental potential of a smaller state.<sup>4</sup> Jharkhand is housed by primitive tribes like Asur, Birhor, Biraja, Korba, Mal, Pahariya, Bhumij, Gond, Ho etc. Their original religion is Sarna, which is a form of nature worship. The tribals of this region started the movement since the post independence period for evolving a Jharkhandi identity which disadvantaged societal groups to augment political resources and influence the policy process in the favour. The demand of autonomy was not promised solely on the uniqueness of tribal cultural heritage but was essentially a fall out of the failure of development policy to intervene in the socio-economic condition of the adivasis and non-advansi of the region. Jharkhandi identity assertion has recently earned considerable academic as well as activist response. Dr. Ram Dayal Munda (1993) observed: “the struggles of the Indigenous and Tribal peoples centre around the issues of land, forests, water resources, culture and identity, directed towards their self-determination and finding a rightful place in the social, cultural, economic and political spheres of life in India.”<sup>5</sup> The modern tribal movement for regional autonomy came to the forefront after India got her independence. Jharkhand movement too is such a phenomenon. The main aim of the Jharkhand movement was the creation of a separate “Adivasi state”. Before independence, it was the main issue. But after independence, demands were made clear to orient the movement from ethnicity to regionalism. Jharkhandi assertion presents the story of a fearless struggle of the people. They aspire that may all the hands get jobs, all the agricultural lands receive water for irrigation, all the villages get electricity, health and other facilities, may Jharkhandis receive modern education through their mother tongue and not a single Jharkhandi die in starvation and hunger. Jharkhandis must aspire and endeavour for their all-round development by asserting and reasserting their specificity as a Jharkhandi highlighting however the deprived identities of the people like Kudmi, Bhuiya, Gond, Gour, Bagal, Pan, Tanti etc.<sup>6</sup>

In India, development is largely been concentrated in the urban areas because availability of infrastructure and other physical resources plays an important role in economic growth. Certain areas which are inaccessible plays an important role. The private entrepreneurs also prefer to invest in the developed regions rather than going to a backward area. This is because of the absence of infrastructural facilities in backward regions, unlike the already developed regions where there are ready-made facilities available. Thus while the developed regions continue to register further growth, the backward areas remain backward. The development strategy in India has also contributed to the regional imbalance. Jharkhand is the victim of such imbalance. This is despite the fact that the achievement of balanced regional development has consistently been the goal of planning process in India. The Industrial Policy Resolution of 1956 stressed the need to reduce regional disparities by encouraging the location of Public Undertakings in economically backward areas. The Second plan focussed on the special needs of the less developed areas. A pattern of investment must be devised on as to lead to balanced development. The successive plans also emphasised the need for the removal of regional disparities. However, the seventh plan gave limited reference to the need of regional balance. The Eighth plan almost ignored the problem of balanced development of states and Ninth Plan accepted the fact that the economic reforms are increasing the regional imbalance and it would continue to increase. It relies on agriculture and rural activities to reduce regional disparities.<sup>7</sup>

Against this backdrop, one can understand the deplorable conditions of the indigenous people. They wanted a political arrangement where they will have a greater share in the political landscape. Hence, they demanded separate homeland for their own by demanding statehood. They primarily demanded the right to preserve their socio-cultural distinctiveness and right to socio-economic development. The tribals of Jharkhand are also entitled with fundamental rights and human rights and can demand the right of administrative autonomy, right to self determination, claim of collective esteem, symbolism of flags, names, public holidays, national anthem, public funds for cultural activities, setting its own educational curricula. There is however a difference of perception between National and Ethnic identities. National identities identifies itself with the grant of special status while smaller ethnic identities can only be granted rights if they identify themselves with the mainstream conferring on the terms and conditions imposed by the latter. Let us now focus on the different problems and complexities that the ethnic group of Jharkhand faces and for which they placed their demand of statehood.

**Firstly**, Land is not only the most important productive resource base for the tribals, but also occupies an important place in their psyche as the mainstay of their social and religious practices. In the backward reaches of backward and poverty-stricken areas, live the communities of tribal people, subsisting off the hill slopes, clutching at crumbs of unemployment and development thrown at them, trekking for days and miles to go to a market, trudging for leagues and leagues to get medical help, having to die to get into the papers, and slogging to feed the contractors, the landlords, the moneylenders, the politicians, the happy group of vested interest who have seemed it their right to make their living and

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considerable fortunes out of the land, labour and other resources of the tribal people.<sup>8</sup> Large scale land of the tribals had been handed to the non tribals specially in Chotanagpur hill area. Lands were taken up by private players like Tata Iron & Steel, Hindustan Copper Mines, Indian Aluminium Company, Heavy Engineering Corporation and others. Construction of big power projects like Damodar Valley Corporation, Pataratu Thermal Power had engulfed thousand of acres resulting in large scale alienation. Over a period of time, this resource base of the tribal communities has tended to get eroded not only through acquisition for public purposes but also through fraudulent transfers, forcible eviction, mortgages, leases, and encroachments.<sup>9</sup> The money lenders and other forces of exploitation often manipulate the records and deeds and forcefully snatch the asset to make their life miserable.

**Secondly**, these private establishments needed trained specialized personnel filled up by people from outside. Huge influx from Bengal and neighbouring states are noticed in Jharkhand. Tribals thereafter find little job opportunity left in their place of origin and shift to other states like Punjab, Assam etc because of job deprivation. Moreover, the areas of tribal concentration are often linked with the urban industrial areas. Instances are not rare to see that the development of communication has only accelerated the impoverishment of the tribal community as they have fallen easy prey for commercial transaction and industrial and mining activities. "The tribal people are losing their lands along the new arteries of communication and being incessantly pushed back from whatever new opportunities are arising. They are being squeezed out or forced to flee on their own, firstly as their lands are acquired by new establishments and then in the face of successive waves of migrants who begin to pour into these areas and spread out. The new enclaves are emerging as islands of affluence and centres of tremendous power and authority in which the tribal has no place or at best can creep in only to occupy the substratum of the new economy as also the new social system." This deprivation continues despite the many laws enacted to protect the tribals. Even the measures designed for the welfare are sometimes used against them. As the Report says, alienation of tribal land has continued unabated notwithstanding enactment of a bevy of laws and promulgation of regulations for protecting the same.<sup>10</sup>

**Thirdly**, the tribals are losing their indigenous culture, social traits, distinctiveness, homogeneity and rich heritage. They are clubbed up together with the non tribals without taking into consideration of their culture and heritage. The tribals are often found to detribalize themselves by assimilating with the mainstream-as they get influenced by the cultures of the aliens, and consequently adopt the same. The tribals have tried to emulate the symbols, values and norms of the groups which surround them. They have acquired an urge for prestige and this has brought about changes of magnitude in their dress pattern, diet and social practices of various kinds. Such an internationalization of the tribals has a cohesive effect. "It tends to pull down the walls which in the past segregated the different sections of society."<sup>11</sup>

**Fourthly**, Jharkhand suffers from an unbalanced development for which the State can be hold responsible. The realization of socio-economic rights for any set of population is dependent on the availability of the various developmental infrastructure such as roads, electricity and irrigation facilities. As the tribal population is a weaker social group with economic vulnerability, they depend more on such resources and public infrastructure. However, the sorry state of affair of the people of Jharkhand depicts a different story. The lack of infrastructural facility compounds the woes of the indigenous people. In spite of the grant-in-aid and developmental loans provided by the Central Government, the conditions of these people have not improved.

**Fifthly**, natural calamities like flood, famine, drought also results in the displacement of the tribals from their homeland and results in forced migration. Coupled with that, the mega-projects have also complemented the process. All tribal development projects hitherto introduced in the agency areas have only developed the tribal region, but not the tribal people. A distinction must be made between 'development' of tribal region, but the tribal emancipation, failing which all those programmes aimed at tribal development would further intensify the hold of the migrants and weaken that of the natives, and would create the illusion of tribal development while the ground reality continues to be one of growing conflict and contradictions in the agency areas.<sup>12</sup>

Displacement and rehabilitation is an aspect of much critical development discourse. Displacement encompasses much more than physical displacement but has important aspect of forced loss of livelihood and in adjustment of social skills and social fracture among communities. In Jharkhand, approximately 80 % of the tribal land has been lost to building of dams like Koel-Karo project, Suvarna-Rekha project, Damodar Valley Corporation, Steel Authority of India Limited, Heavy Engineering Corporation and private sector enterprises like TISCO and TELCO. Despite the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act of 1869 which prohibits outsiders from buying tribal land, the land has been transferred from the tribals to non-tribals. The tribals have resisted the non-tribal settlement, sometimes violently. The basic phenomenon that characterizes the situation of indigenous people of Chotanagpur Plateau is that of dispossession. They are systematically and methodically being dispossessed of the ownership of their means of production, of the products of their labour and of the very means of human existence. They are dispossessed of their cultures, their values, and their very identity through

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well planned policies, such as those of integration and assimilation, of bringing them to the so-called 'national mainstream'. This phenomenon of dispossession takes place both directly through deprivation of their land, for example, and indirectly through denial of the benefits of development, of their rights etc.<sup>13</sup>

**Sixthly**, after Chattisgarh, Jharkhand is the leading producer of variety of minerals like coal, ironore, copper ore, mica, bauxite, graphite, limestone, uranium etc. In spite of such abundant resources, the tribal inhabitants of the region suffer from a great deal of crisis which has collectively resulted in creating unrests among them. It is important to note that Jharkhand generates about 70 percent of the total revenue of the state of Bihar while only 20 percent of the revenue was spent for the development of the former. Moreover, there was hardly any infrastructure for harnessing her capability and natural endowment. To add to this, most of the scams in Bihar like Forest Scam, Bitumen Scam, Tribal Land Scam, Fodder Scam etc took place in Jharkhand which has tarnished its image very bitterly.

**Seventhly**, the National Forest Policy 1988 was enacted which stipulated that all agencies responsible for forest management should ensure that the tribal people are closely associated with the regeneration, plantation, development, harvesting of forest so as to provide them with gainful employment. Instead of such safeguards and legislative acts, the tribals face the problems of eviction because of development of national parks, wild life sanctuaries, and protection of the forests. When the tribals are uprooted from their forests to make way for modern industries it is genocide and when their culture is systematically destroyed, it is ethnocide.<sup>14</sup>

**Eighthly**, the problem of indebtedness is a menace to the tribals which pushes the tribals to extreme conditions of poverty and forces them to dispense with their meagre resources, including the small bits and pieces of land to pay off the loans at exorbitant rate of interest charged by the money-lenders. The commercial vending of alcohol had further impoverished the tribals. Although the system of bonded labour and slavery is prohibited yet it is predominant in some of the fringes of the tribal society. In rural Jharkhand, the state is thought to be incapable of fulfilling the promises it made as a servant of the people, the guarantor of a certain social order, and a power above partial interests. It is recognized to be administered by people who have their own personal agendas, and whose vision of the common good may be far removed from that of ordinary people.<sup>15</sup> Psychologically, these people in many areas are not leading a happy life as they are socially and economically deprived. They constantly experience the deprivation of positive life aspects. They do not have permanent jobs to earn their livelihood. They mainly depend upon seasonal works which may sometimes disappoint them due to the failure of monsoon in their living areas. This mainly causes them economic deprivation, leaving them in starvation.<sup>16</sup>

Tribal politics is seen largely as an assertion of identity on the part of tribal community whose cultures face the threat of becoming extinct. As these communities are pushed to a desperate situation and are literally knocked away from their traditional habitat, they are making a sincere attempt so as to carve out a niche for them. But the battle is highly unmatched as they are battling against a developed modern state which is disproportionately stronger than what they are. Hence, it is a battle that they are destined to lose. The new approach, hence is marked by a celebration of this tragedy.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the grievances and antagonism that have accumulated in the minds of the indigenous community in Jharkhand can be well deduced from the points enumerated above. The action and the interaction of such subjective and objective factors have resulted in the initiation of catastrophic changes of the tribal communities which had contributed to worsen their position in the globalized world even further.

Initially, the problem was of identity. The indigenous people were suffering as they were not able to uphold their identity. But the issue of identity is a complex one. The objective of the movement then shifted from ethnicity to regionalism and politicization has taken place slowly but steadily. However, no matter whether it is the politicization of identity or identification of politics, both is evident if one looks at the landscape of Jharkhand. In the 1950s, the political wing of the Chotanagpur Adivasi Mahasabha, the Jharkhand Party, had demanded a separate state of Jharkhand within the Indian federal union, further developing the autonomy movement. The stress was on Jharkhand as a colony of Bihar; while the development machinery of Bihar performed disproportionately poorly in Jharkhand's mineral, land and especially forest resources. The demand for a Jharkhandi state evolved into a regional movement enjoying the support of a range of people but with the common understanding that the area's identity derived from an exploitation of its population and its distinct cultural heritage. This view formed one basis of the struggle for Jharkhand's independence from Bihar within the Indian federal union; that the region should be restored to those who rightfully owned it and could best manage it, to its true "sons of the soil".<sup>18</sup> It is again true that the ethnic groups who suffers from identity crisis and get politicized is again not wrong if they want to have greater satisfaction of ethno-nationalist aspiration, economic and administrative efficiency, democratic deepening, strengthening of federalism, stakeholder participation in local as well as provincial development and want to have the opportunity for delivering good governance. But certain

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questions can be raised at this point of time. Can a separate and smaller state like Jharkhand be able to address the genuine grievances of the people? Would the benefits be appropriated by the regional elite belonging to numerical large and affluent classes or distributed amongst the indigenous people who are there at the lower echelon of the society? The State is suffering from tremendous unplanned urbanization that are carried by multinational tycoons and land mafia which results in displacement of the poor tribals in the name of development. The experience of new smaller states show that political class in these states have been unable to cope with the pressure brought upon from the corporate business houses but upon exploitation of the natural resource of the region. Moreover, given the presence of the Naxalism in the State, it is important to note that both Jharkhand and Chattisgarh are dependent on the Centre to meet up the challenges thrown up by the Maoist forces. Another significant aspect is the economic viability and political will. If the present leadership fails in the development of the impoverished region, then it would be a betrayal of the aspiration of the ordinary people who are dreaming of good governance and greater development benefitting all. Regionalism which is being expressed through the movement for separate statehood, has created new demands like recognising the rights of the indigenous population and providing primacy to the issues of regional ties and culture. It has also brought forth the demands to rework the issue of governance in favour of the disadvantaged groups. Jharkhand is a centre of attention for governmental, nongovernmental, bilateral and multilateral development efforts for its doubly marginalized indigenous populations. They are marginalized because they live in a state which contains one of the India's poorest populations. But articulation of such heavy weight demands and their fulfilment is not a very smooth affair. It has increased the tension as well as the contradiction not only between regions but also among different social categories. These contradictions have manifested in different forms, demanding more economic resources to economically backward regions, shift in the paradigm of development and contradiction between self-defined categories and others.

### **III**

The birth of Jharkhand as an impact of Regionalism has both positive and negative connotation. On the positive side, it can be said that regionalism helps to fulfil the demands of people of a particular geographical territory and give them the power to manage their own affairs in their own way. It generates political participation and plays a catalytic role in mobilizing the society. It prizes the culture of sub-groups and those at the periphery. These people who are so long denied the right to get representation, are now allowed to have a stake in the political affairs of the country. In the words of Prof. Iqbal Narain, regionalism broadly expects regions to be treated as at par as units of a whole and demands the constituents cherished aspiration to manage their own internal affairs together with a right to judicious resource-sharing within the national framework.<sup>19</sup>

However, there are certain negative dimensions of Regionalism as well which can not be discounted. Regionalism has the potentiality of nurturing sectionalism and right of self determination in the form of secession or complete statehood. This aspect is essentially negative and destructive. The political elites and vested interests with a great mastery and sophistication earn the support of the people who have suffered for a prolonged period. They exploit their sense of deprivation and help to develop a regional attitude of fragmentation from the main land as a mark of protest and dissatisfaction. The deprived people, especially the indigenous nationalities are hopeful that the new state in the country's federal system will address the challenges of building up of a democratic and inclusive society which will accommodate the interests of the ethnic groups of Jharkhand. This would envisage a new political framework in which the indigenous people will participate in the decision making process. The federal framework would help in the process of state restructuring and would address the problem of exclusion and identity based politics. Inequality and lack of access to resources and basic services had generated a "feeling of deprivation and injustice", in the minds of people of Jharkhand which have consequently resulted in a rebellious response. When the vested interests were gaining political mileage by cleverly selling the cause of the Indigenous people, other political party also became conscious of their position in the game of bargaining for statehood. Thus they too tried to earn the support of their own voters by playing the same card. Slowly but steadily, it became clear that the nationalist interests of the population has been reduced to a deliberate orchestration of vested political interests rather than of the country's long term stability. The people of Jharkhand who have little experience of statecraft are now bewildered with the possibilities and responsibilities of a new state. Though a new state has been created but ruling alliance has done much damage to the Jharkhandi and particularly to the adivasi people. At the economic level, industrializing and mining in adivasis land was being encouraged thus paving the way for capitalist industrialists to flourish in the mineral rich region. The needs of Jharkhandi farmers for irrigation of the people in basic health and rural education are completely and deliberately neglected.<sup>20</sup>

Regionalism is the source of conflict but there are certain means by which it can be resolved. But it is not a magic stick that can solve every contradictions existing in a state and a society. The issue of regionalism should be judiciously

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handled otherwise this might lead to protracted conflict, civil war and disintegration of the country on ethnic, religious and linguistic lines. India is a fast emerging major regional and global power. The socio-political stability of India is thus directly relevant to India's national interest. There are two choices before us. If the roots of regionalism are allowed to grow deeper then this will result in the administrative break-up of the country into bits and pieces. On the other hand, the issue of regionalism can be resolved judiciously instead of throwing challenge to national identity and integrity. The choice is therefore left to us to decide which way to go by prioritizing the unity, integrity and sovereignty of the nation at large.

**Key Words:** Regionalism, Ethnicity, Development

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