

Political Parties and Regional Discourse in Sikkim

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Abstract- This paper is an attempt to analyze the regionalist discourse in Sikkim and how the regionalist discourse is similar or different from the nationalist discourse. Ever since Sikkim was merged with the Indian Union the regional political parties have been playing an important role in the developmental process of the state. The important feature of Sikkim politics have been rooted in the regional politics. The most remarkable point in this is the absence of the role of national political parties in the state. The present paper summarizes the role and performance of regional parties since the birth of state in 1975. It tries to bring out the study on how the regional political parties particularly Sikkim Sangram parishad (SSP) and Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) in Sikkim have been able to mobilize the traditional communities into politics.

Index Terms- communities, ethnic, parties, Regional, Sikkim.

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of regionalism and regionalization of politics in India is not a new trend. The growth of regionalism in Indian Politics after independence can be traced to the 1960's after the re-organization of the states in 1956. Since then demand for separate statehood, more autonomy within the Indian federalism, regionalism on the basis of language has been the main context of the study of regionalism in India. In recent, the regional political parties are playing successful role having greater impact and making necessary negotiations with the national political parties.

Various authors and writers have agreed that Regionalism is identified with the problem of tradition. Kenneth Frampton has cited philosopher Paul Ricoeur in his essay, 'Prospects for a Critical Regionalism', which reads that identifying the resolution of tradition and modernity has become the central paradox in recent years (Coill and Watt, 2009)

Thus, one of the important characteristics of regionalism can be understood as attempt to address the long existing traditions and reviving and reinterpreting to in modern forms. According to Curtis, Regionalism "at its best, regionalism penetrates to the generating principles and symbolic substructures of the past then transforms these into forms that are right for the changing social order of the present."

While discussing about regional political parties, their growth and their intense participation in Indian politics, it is pertinent to note here that a regional political party is a party which contests and wins elections in one state on the basis of a regional agenda. The flexibility of the Indian constitution, to some extent, is the determinant factor in the development of regionalism in India. This lead to formation of new separate states on the basis of regional disparity and some demands are

not yet been recognized. It is seen that since the re-organization of states in 1956, there have been altogether 29 states of the Indian Union.

Since 1990's, there has been a phenomenal growth and influence of regional political parties in the national political scenario in India. Different authors had diverse opinions and arguments on the emergence and growth of regional political parties in Indian political system. For some, the regionalisation of politics is due to slow developmental process at the state level and to some it is due to uneven economic development that led to the growth of regional disparity.

At the same time there are some other reasons which can be considered as a factor that has contributed to the growth and expansion of regional parties in India. To Paul Brass (1995) the growth of regional parties is a natural growth in a country which has a diverse ethno-cultural-linguistic base. Sudha Pai (1990) argues that the rise of regional parties is due to the complex interplay between the regional consciousness and social, political and economic developments that has taken place since independence. According to eminent writers like Bhabri (1998) the growth of regional political parties was due to the splits in the Congress party and decline in its organisation since 1967. He further argues that regional parties in recent times have acquired significant position and strength. This is due to the failure and weaknesses of the national political parties and their failure to respond to the demands and aspirations of regional people.

The regional political parties have been able to stable their position in respective state legislatures and have increased their strength considerably and are playing a crucial role in the national politics in recent years.

II. REGIONALISM IN SIKKIM

Regionalism in Sikkim is distinct from that of any other part of the country. The phenomena of regionalism can be better understood on ethnic-cultural lines in this small Himalayan state. Sikkim is predominantly inhabited by the three ethnic communities; the Bhutia's, the Lepcha's and the Nepalese. The phenomenon of regionalism in Sikkim is much stronger than the other states of the Indian Union. When Sikkim was merged with the Indian Union in 1975, then, Sikkim was a small independent Himalayan Kingdom. Since its merger Sikkim has been ruled by regional political parties more particularly by the Sikkim Janata Parishad from 1979 to 1984, Sikkim Sangram Parishad from 1984 to 1993 and Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) from 1994 onwards. Though the first government was formed by a national political party in 1974, but it could not survive for long. Sikkim, which is a plural society with different ethnic-cultural-linguistic groups, right from the period of Namgyal dynasty have always witnessed confrontation between various ethnic communities

regarding the issue of distinct cultural and social values. These groups often claim for separate recognition as a distinct community as well as constitutional recognition. For example, the Limboo's and the Tamang's claim that they are a separate socio-cultural community and therefore they are different from the Nepalese which can be broadly categorized into Aryans and Mongoloids (Gurung, 2011, p.156). The issue of preservation of regional identity in Sikkim was evident even before the merger. The identity preservation issue was more prominent among the Bhutia's and the Lepcha's. Historical reports presents that the Lepcha's and the Tsong's (Limboos) often resented Bhutia domination in Sikkim which lasted for 333 years (1642-1974). The formation of a political party– Sikkim Independent Front Party by Ruth Karthak in 1966 which concentrated in the articulation of social, economic and political grievances of the Lepchas in Sikkim also provides evidences to this. Thus, the ethnic divisions and the feeling of community identity is not a new phenomenon in Sikkim. More significantly it got accentuated after the merger of Sikkim with the Indian Union and after the growth of regional political parties in the state.

Sikkim being a traditional plural society, the regional political parties have been playing their political game on traditional bonds and relations. These political parties use ethnic mobilization for their support base and eventually they become successful in capturing political power. The people belonging to different communities support parties in order to attain their objectives. The fear of negligence of their community has also been one of the reasons why people always supported some or the other regional political parties in the state. Another factor also may be noted here that as in many parts of the country it is the regional political parties, which was able to bring necessary developments to the region. That is also the reason why national political parties have been functioning with a regional base. The national political parties have never been successful in capturing power in Sikkim. These parties always align with one or the other regional party in contesting the election in the state.

With the inception of democracy in Sikkim in 1975 it was expected that politics based on ethnic-cultural identity would gradually disappear. But as far as political mobilization is concerned, ethnic-cultural identities still rules the political scene in Sikkim. During the regime of Nar Bahadur Bhandari some of the Sikkimese communities like Rai, Tamang, Manger, Limboo, Gurung, Sunuwar were excluded from the status of Other Backward Class category in the state. This created the feeling of alienation and discrimination among various groups. Sikkim Democratic Front, a regional political party was formed which campaigned on the issue of the identity of the left out communities from the OBC list. SDF also came up with the issue of giving the constitutional Schedule Tribe status to the Tamang and Limboo communities. Therefore in Sikkim regional feeling is much stronger than in any part of the country except in some North East States. The existence of national political party and their survival story is seldom found as these political parties have failed to become popular among the Sikkimese people. Another important factor to be noted in the context of the national political party being unpopular in the state is that, Sikkim a young state of the Indian Union has always been away from the real state structure of India. National integration is very loose and we do not find any regional political party talking very strongly

in terms of national integration. Also, National political parties never tried to bridge the gap. The regional parties in the state have their focus on regional issues only. But only in recent years, the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) is been able to bring the state in the national streamline.

Since long, there has been a continuous demand for the recognition of ethnic languages in Sikkim. In 1995-96 six languages of Nepali sub-groups were granted official status (Gurung, 2011, p.416). As mentioned earlier, political parties in Sikkim have always resorted to ethnic-political mobilization. More particularly the regional parties like Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP) and Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) which have ruled Sikkim for more than a decade have mobilized on ethnic lines for their electoral gain and political purposes. Many other political parties in Sikkim have also been founded on distinct regional lines. The parties like the Sikkim Congress (Revolutionary) have been formed with a distinct regional base. The smaller political parties which have not been successful in elections function more or less like a pressure group. The parties like the Sikkim Congress (Revolutionary) and the Sikkim Gorkha Prajatantrik party have their base on supporting the interest of a concerned community contributing for the regional bias in the state.

The demand of Sikkimese identity is a long debated issue which was presented in a different way in the pre-merger period and after the merger of Sikkim. The issue of Sikkimese identity became prominent in 1940's with the rise and the growth of many political parties and socio-cultural organizations. For political parties like Sikkim Sangram Parishad, Sikkimese identity was associated with the issue of De-merger of Sikkim with India. For the existing ruling regional political party, Sikkimese identity includes the socio-cultural and political aspects of all the three ethnic groups in the state. This has led to the concentration more on the community interest and emergence of community identity consciousness which has further led to the formation of organizations on ethnic lines. For instance, the Renjyong Mutanchi Rong Ong Seyzum (Sikkim Lepcha Youth Association) demand for separate identity for the Lepcha's who are considered to be the original inhabitants of Sikkim and their protection against the Bhutias. Akhil Sikkim Kirat Limboo Chumlung, the Limboo organization claims that Limboos are not Nepalese and the other organizations being the Bhutia Organization like Survival Sikkimese and SIBLAC– Sikkim Bhutia Lepcha Apex Committee, Sikkim Sherpa Association etc.

Therefore the identity factor in Sikkim is seen to be interwoven with various communities. It is noted that political parties operate within ethnic lines and the political parties rely on these communities for electoral support in the state. In Sikkim, regional political parties identify themselves with one or the other ethnic communities. For example, the National party, Congress (I) is always backed by the Tribal's in Sikkim, the Sikkim Sangram Parishad was the party of the Upper Caste community and the Sikkim Democratic Party is termed to be the party of the OBCs. Thus in Sikkim politics centers on ethnic identity and issues. The absence of an organized opposition political party in the state and the dominance of one regional political party for more than a decade is one of the striking feature of Sikkim regional politics. Regional political parties like the SSP and the SDF has developed due to the presence of socio-

economic-religious-cultural plural society. Thus, in Sikkim, as noted earlier that after the merger in 1975 politics appeared to be more regionalist in nature. The growth and success of regional parties like SSP and SDF in Sikkim not only ushered voters into the electoral arena but also mobilized the traditional communities into politics.

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