



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 6. Issue.3. 2019 (July-Sept.)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

PROBLEMATIC OF REGION IN LITERARY THEORY: THE CASE OF UTTARAKHAND

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.63.97>



ABSTRACT

Regional studies gained prominence in literary coterie after several scholars of the French Annals School like Le Roy Laurie shifted the focus of the scholars towards the entity called region. Almost at the same time, postmodernist and post-colonial thinkers began questioning the idea of nation and called it a man-made construct. Patha Chatterjee looked at several literary and artistic works of India to prove that India was an artificial construct created in novels of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and was in fact a colonial legacy. Some scholars juxtaposed nation to subnational or supra-national regions believing the latter to be geographically coherent. They believed that various regions even within India owed their existence to geography and therefore were not artificial constructs. However, this paper argues that any region is as much a product of geography as it is of politics and culture. Taking the case of Uttarakhand, it traces the various political and cultural factors which went into the creation of the state. Uttarakhand, therefore is seen as a region as much created in literature and songs as due to its unique hilly topography.

Key words: Post-colonialism, Nation, Region, Uttarakhand

Introduction

Region, as a field of study, has remained prominent since the latter half of the twentieth century. It was perhaps after the Second World War that specialized study of geographical regions became crucial to the experts of international affairs, as Peter Katzenstein suggests. (130) Postmodernism, which too became prominent after the first half of the twentieth century, created a distrust of the “meta-narratives”, of universalism and absolute truths. Like the area specialists, the postmodernists too preferred the category of region as opposed to the artificially constructed nations. (Soderbaum 1) Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* led the path in this direction. The Indian scholars like Partha Chatterjee followed. An interest in regional studies developed across the world. (Soderbaum 1) In Anthropology, Robert Redfield and Mckim Marriott tried to understand India through the categories of “Great tradition” and “Little Traditions”. Regional narratives were studied as authentic documents reflecting multiple truths from within a single nation.

Region continues to be looked upon as a fixed geographical entity by both area specialists and postmodernists. This paper, instead of focusing on the relationship between topography and the category called region, seeks to examine the role of politics and culture (which may or may not be a product of a region’s geography) in creating a region. The paper also traces the history of the creation of Uttarakhand

which attained statehood in the year 2000. Taking Uttarakhand as a case point, it underlines the political and cultural influences which shaped the region. More importantly, it seeks to emphasize the contingency of regional formations as they continually evolve or dissolve due to various political and cultural forces.

Discussion

G. Aloysius in his lecture entitled "Regionalising India", states that a region can politically be defined as "an incomplete segment, or a part of a larger whole (nation)." While the geographical definition of region which he prefers, according to him, conveys a sense of "a unified whole", a "self-contained landscape." James Scott, too, while discussing the hills of Southeast Asia delves into the topographical importance of "inaccessibly remote zones" and creates a binary between the hills and the plains. (10) This discourse specially becomes more powerful when one discusses the mountainous regions world over. Hills are looked upon as comparatively isolated regions which develop their own system of governance and culture, as James Scott in his book, *The Art of Not Being Governed* seems to suggest.

The fact that the hills, owing to their unique geography, needed a different administration than that provided for the plains gained impetus during the Uttarakhand Movement for separate statehood. It was believed that the geography of the hills had also determined its culture which was very different from the culture of the people living in the plains. One of the scholars stated, "It is common knowledge that Uttarakhand is socially, economically and ethnically different from the rest of the state (UP) and requires a different treatment". (Pant 32). There was also a comparison with the other hill states like Mizoram, Meghalaya and Himachal Pradesh due to similar topography of the regions. (Nautiyal 10)

However, focusing only on unique geographical features to define a region does not take into consideration the influence of the external factors on the region. Region then seems like a distinct but isolated and impermeable category. Sanjay Subrahmanyam points out that it is important to look at the "interface between the local and regional and the supra-regional, at times even global" (745) Even though his study is directed towards the interconnectivity between Europe and Asia in the nineteenth century, his methodology of looking at "connecting histories" in order to reach a more comprehensive understanding of a region can be borrowed to study the region now known as Uttarakhand. The difficult terrain of the hill state might lead to a belief that it remained comparatively isolated until it was connected with the other places through roads and railways. However, upon looking at the trans-Himalayan trade which flourished throughout Nepal, Tibet and the kingdoms of Garhwal and Kumaon, such a notion can be easily dispensed away with. The centuries old trade, which came to a stop after the Indo-China war of 1962, had linguistic and sartorial implications in the erstwhile kingdoms of Garhwal and Kumaon. (Bergmann 77) To this date, the unique cultural features which the people of Uttarakhand identify with were borrowed from Tibet.

The influence of Brahminical Hinduism, Buddhism and some sects like the Nath Panthis too had a major impact on the region. The *teertha yatra* or the holy pilgrimage to the Badrinath Dham, along with Kedarnath, Gangotri and Yamunotri continues to influence the economy as well as culture of the region. Similarly, the several waves of migration from the plains too shaped the region.

As is clear from the above discussion, geography alone cannot be a defining feature of a region. Uttarakhand, despite its geographical features, cannot be called a distinct region only on the basis of geography. Further, if topography alone could demarcate regions across the world, the regional boundaries would always remain definite. As the ever-increasing demands for separate statehood from various regions of India prove, region is a far more dynamic category. Politics and culture influence too play a crucial role. The British understood this when they gained possession of large regions of India. They tried to divide their territory into smaller administrative provinces. Several surveys were conducted, some with the help of the Royal Geographical Society of England which was established in London in 1830. The empire was divided geographically and culturally by the scholars. F. J. Richards discussed the attempts of Mr. Arden Wood to divide India into geographically distinct regions. Richards himself had tried to categorize the various regions linguistically, politically and on the basis of population density and religion. (20-29) Asha Sarangi in her article "Reorganization, then and now" looks at the continuous formation of regions within India post-Independence.

She examines the role of State Reorganisation Commission appointed by Jawaharlal Nehru in 1950s and the dilemma faced by the Commission in order to accommodate multiple culturally and linguistically diverse regions into the various states. At the same time, she emphasizes on how these political state formations too “had cultural, educational, political and economic manifestations.” (Sarangi)

It is evident that regional formations are continually in a state of flux with regions being created as outcomes of various cultural and political forces. But a discourse on the relationship between topography and regional entities marginalizes the influence of these forces. The idea of Uttarakhand as the region, for example, owes as much to the political and cultural atmosphere of the nineteenth century as it does to its tough hilly terrain. Political environment of the hills completely transformed in the nineteenth century. The British gained the control of Kumaon and some parts of Garhwal from the Gurkhas. Following the Treaty of Sugauli in 1815, probably after centuries, the traditional enemy kingdoms of Kumaon and Garhwal came under one rule. (Upreti 19) Despite similar geographical positions, the two had shared mutual rivalry towards each other. (Walton 114-117) The two regions had separate existence for centuries. A section of Skanda Purana, “Kedarkhand” described the hills of Garhwal whereas, the section “Manaskhand” reflected upon the region of Kumaon. Kumaon, which extended from the snowy peaks of Pithoragarh to the modern district of Almora shared its boundary with Nepal, Tibet and Garhwal. The kingdom was ruled by the Katyuri dynasty till 1050 A.D. The Chand dynasty then ruled the region till 1790, after which, the Gurkhas and the British respectively occupied Kumaon. (Mittal VII) Garhwal, on the other hand, consisted of fifty-two principalities which were conquered by Ajay Pal in the fourteenth century. So, it was in the fourteenth century that the region known as Garhwal came into existence. The two adjacent kingdoms fought constantly. Rudra Chand of Kumaon, in the sixteenth century fought against the king of Garhwal. His son, Lakshmi Chand and then his grandson Udyot Chand and great-grandson, Baz Bahadur, continued the war with Garhwal.

With the British occupation of the region, the two traditional enemies found a common goal. They collectively fought against the British. Print media which was coming into significance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century not only tried to bridge the gap between Garhwal and Kumaon, but also united the people against the British. The regional newspapers played a significant role in bringing forth the oppressive policies of the British with respect to the hills. On 1st May, 1872, “Samay Vinod”, a newspaper from Nainital (Kumaon) commented on the plight of the public due to a famine that struck Garhwal the same year. The two influential newspapers from Garhwal and Kumaon, “Garhwali” and “Almora Akhbar” respectively, collectively led the fight against the British practice of “Begar” (Joshi 45-54).

By the time India gained its independence, the idea of a separate administration for the hills of Uttarakhand had solidified. So when the region was merged with Uttar Pradesh, the people of Garhwal and Kumaon began to struggle for a separate hill state. The demands were put before the state and central government in 1953, 1966, 1985, 1990 and almost every year after that. Several regional forums like *Uttarakhand Kranti Dal*, *Kumaon Morcha* and *Uttarakhand Jan Sangharsh Vahini* continued the struggle in the political sphere. (Tiwari 99-101)

In the literary sphere, several poets and writers like Girish Tiwar “Girda”, Balwant Manral, Kunwar Singh Negi “Karmath” and Somwarilal Uniyal tried to create a “Pahadi” identity. Publication houses like “Pahad” and “Veer Gatha Prakashan” published history and geography of Uttarakhand. Folk heroes from both Kumaon and Garhwal found a place in the literature. More importantly, literature of the Indian freedom struggle, where both Garhwalis and Kumaonis had fought together was reprinted. Shekhar Pathak in the preface of a booklet entitled “Uttarakhand Janandolan” wrote that the hills’ struggle against Begar was “a story of exploitation and the first successful people’s movement of Uttarakhand.” (Pathak II) Religion too was brought into the scenario. The cult of Nanda Devi, the only common regional deity worshipped by the people of Garhwal and Kumaon was promoted. (Negi 60). Thus, during the Uttarakhand Movement a history and culture of Uttarakhand was recreated in order to engulf the traditional rivalry between Garhwal and Kumaon and create an identity for a collective Uttarakhand.

Conclusion

Therefore, as was the case with other regions in the Indian subcontinent, Uttarakhand was a progeny of geographical, political and cultural forces. The significance of geographical location of a region, which is insisted upon by scholars of area studies and postmodernism undoubtedly has its own significance. But at the same time, a discourse on region should not undermine the importance of political and cultural factors. As a discussion on Uttarakhand points out, a region owes its existence to political forces as well. Culture, which itself evolves with the political environment leads to the formation of a regional identity. These two factors themselves are dynamic and therefore can lead to creation of various regions within a defined space. A land of innumerable petty forts and chieftains which catered to rivalry between Kumaon and Garhwal for centuries is now identified as Uttarakhand. Geography undoubtedly had its share in defining the area, but as the above discussion proves, political and cultural influences too had their own impact.

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