

AUTONOMY AND EMERGING POLITICAL IMAGINATION

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In India, the notion of autonomy has been in debate in the public domain largely in its political sense. This may be more, or less true elsewhere too except in countries, where the indigenous people's movement has existed. In the Bolivian Constitution the term autonomy appears in large number of articles as a governing principle to be respected at all levels. In our country, it is clear that the "yearnings for autonomy" witnessed since independence have been addressed with actions fitting a nation state in birth, and that, with its coming of age, we are today witness to their closure as well as reversal. Simultaneously, today we also witness events and movements, in which we may very well glimpse a new hope for, as well as new visions of autonomy.

Autonomy Under the Nation State

Independent India has seen many movements for recognition, self-governance, decentralization of power and formation of States. At the time of bifurcation, the then existing substantial regional autonomy of Kashmir, preservation of which was a stated precondition for its inclusion in Indian union, was reduced under Indian rule to a "special status" of the State of Jammu and Kashmir. This was achieved by Article 35A, added in 1954 by a Presidential Constitutional Order under Article 370.

Autonomous district councils, formed for tribal regions in the Northeast hills as parts of a Union Territory, and later as parts of a full States under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, appeared much later starting with reorganization of the North-East. These Councils were granted substantial executive, legislative, financial, and judicial powers.¹

These, similar autonomous institutions created along the entire Northeast border under provisions of the Fifth and the Sixth Schedules, and the later Ladakh Autonomous Hill Council of 1995 for the Leh district, are all concerned with border regions. There have been no similar developments in response to movements for recognition and pursuit of 'own ways of life' elsewhere, including even in the large tribal tracts well within the country. Clearly, the notion of autonomy in the political sense, seen in action here, is consistent with the cartographic anxieties associated with formation then of a new nation state in its secular-liberal incarnation. It has been called "governmentalized" autonomy. Failures of these autonomous arrangements have been seen as consequences of "governmentality of autonomy" instituted by the Indian Union. Typically, the failures, as they have largely been understood as failures to "develop", are seen to be triggered by violations and delays by the Centre, and the parent State, in honouring their financial liabilities toward these autonomous regions. They are marked by feelings of neglect and second-rate treatment among smaller tribes. There have been demands for cessation from the union. Some of the forces for cessation have been incorporated into the electoral and democratic processes. For example, the Mizo National Front, after holding the Centre responsible for the Rat Famine of 1959, led a major uprising in 1966, carried out militant underground activities for number of years. But, after signing the Mizoram Accord with the Centre in 1986 the MNF has now been drawn into an alliance with NDA to rule Mizoram. With emergence of the Hindu nationalist avatar of the nation state, given the Muslim connection of Kashmir region, the abrogation of special status of Kashmir and reorganization of the State into two union territories is a natural fallout of political reduction of autonomy. By all accounts, the planned delimitation exercise is aimed at furthering central control of the region.

Limitations of Autonomy in a Nation State

Beyond the overall “governmentalization of autonomy” in service of the nation state, various studies of experiences in instances of autonomy recognize the complexities and the variety in forms of autonomy legislation, workings of institutions as well as the changing emphases in new demands for autonomy.² They point out the paradox of Indian autonomies.³ These studies, however, seem to concentrate on the ‘political subject’, “whose existence is in contradistinction to the existence of the governmental realities of this world”.⁴ The political subject is a product of autonomous practices that are indicated by autonomy. Analytic of autonomy needs to reflect on the “kinds and relations of power that propel emergence of autonomous spaces”.⁴ Therefore, it seems that it is primarily power relations that are taken to define autonomous spaces. Concern is with a political subject “who claims autonomy and defines oneself against the dominant form of relation”. Also, the “autonomous spaces” seem to be essentially demarcated by a dominating external power relation, say, one imposed by a nation state. So, autonomy, is “different from freedom, because freedom is essentially a value, while autonomy is essentially a category of power.” Autonomy is the “other” of governmentality. It is “different from self-government because, while self-government focuses on the ability of the individual or the collective individual to govern oneself, autonomy always points towards the supplement that remains after (the task of) government has been accomplished.”

We may call this a strictly “political” view of autonomy. Attempting to seek to overcome the paradox of autonomy practices in India, it does throw up some important insights.

1. It clearly sees that “the long liberal thinking of autonomy never came to terms with freedom, will, and the political realities of coercion and management of orders connected with will”. The public sphere, where

democracy resides, is unable to cope with the politics of autonomy. One reason seen for this is that "modern democratic polities with their celebrated public spheres are not all dialogic, therefore they understand freedom much more and are ready to be guided by wills, but cannot cope with autonomies, perched as they are on the old juridical notions of sovereignty. All that these polities can accommodate is a sort of "boutique multiculturalism."⁵

2. Dialogic politics, considered as the "third dimension" of autonomy is seen as resulting from a quest for "minimal justice", ruled by principles of *compensation, supervision, custodianship, guarantee and innovation*. It is minimal because quest is not for removal of all wrongs, and *because liberal order does not allow full justice to be played out*. This is clearly a liberal downgrading of the general idea of "dialogic politics". It follows from a limited view of justice – as issue of justice surfacing repeatedly from the tussle between two political idioms – (i) a liberal / nationalistic idiom grounded in constitution and its continuous re-interpretations, tolerating autonomy to varying degree; (ii) a territorial idiom demanding "recognition", itself also reinforced by the same constitutional liberal ideas. This is discussed in the context of the old deadlocked and failing politics of autonomy failures, as a third escape dimension. Thus, it is clearly based on a belief in the possibility of success of a liberal dialogic order. This is important in that we may understand better some events like the recent "Dravidian Model" initiative in this light.
3. Autonomous practices can be viewed as reorganizing principle of future society, creating a dialogic zone for negotiation of autonomies.
4. A more potent idea is suggested in the context of Kashmir. This is the notion of *autonomy of autonomies*. It is contended that the notion "needs to be approached both ontologically and epistemologically. In the former sense, what ought to be at the center of projects designing accountable institutions

are people with multiple identifications, and not categorically fixed ethno-religious identities. Equally critical is to ensure that we move from principles to practices / institutions and not vice versa. One of the cardinal principles on which the notion of autonomy of autonomies rest relates to a paradigm shift from domination to non-domination as the fundamental principle of governance at all levels.”⁶ This suggests assertion of existence not admitted otherwise, building of new institutions in consonance with it as well as urging co-existence based on denial of domination. Further, the principle “compels an acknowledgment of the fact that there is not one but several geographical knowledges of autonomy, produced at various sites. The challenge is to ensure that none of these geographical knowledges, especially the one produced at the official sites, acquires the hegemonic and homogenizing status of an unchallengeable regime of truth.”⁶ This has to do with denial of an “official history of the region” and assertion of a local understanding.

A Knowledge View of Autonomy

The weakness of the political view of autonomy is seen in many ways. It is developed in relation to practices of autonomy in India, which are largely restricted to border regions and reflect anxieties of a nation state in relation to the national borders. As far as our country is concerned, the borders have their own specificities – difficult forest and hill tracts quite different from much of the mainland, inhabited by “indigenous” tribal populations, religious demographics, etc. It declares that no viable non-territorial autonomies have been produced in India. Although, it clearly sees that liberalism fails to come to term with autonomies, the program it suggests for breaking the impasse old autonomy movements have reached is a liberal dialogic order. I think that this weakness is because of the understanding of autonomy as a category of power, and of autonomous spaces as spaces created amid interplay of power relations, including relations with external dominating powers.

A knowledge view of autonomy situates it in the life activity of each human being in a community. Autonomous spaces are then permeated by the knowledge spaces of that community. They are neither created nor defined by an external imposed power relation. (That does not mean that they are not affected, and possibly may even be destroyed by an external power, as many have undoubtedly been since the onslaught of imperialism.)

A knowledge view of autonomy is to regard autonomy as the chief characteristic of all life. Man's autonomy expresses itself in action composed of creation and imagination. The two are joined together in that both refer to something new, something which did not exist at the earlier moment. And, also, in that they relate directly to each other as inseparable aspects of the same autonomous act. They are both concrete in the truest sense of the term. They refer to appearance on the scene of a new element of reality, an element in which they are merged. In no sense is this new element conceivable apart from the individual who first brought it into existence. However, it is shareable – others may partake of it. It can trigger new imagination and new creation, by other individuals too.

Autonomous actions of individuals in a community are the primary source of all knowledge with the individual, as well as of its continuous renewal and deepening. In the same measure, this autonomous action itself also partakes of that knowledge. Thus, autonomous activity as such achieves a 'higher' form and becomes knowledge activity. Knowledge is then a higher form of autonomous creation. That is not to say that it becomes precise, or universal, or free. It is just that it is now eminently shareable in the community, and, as such, adds to the whole repertoire of knowledge with the community. It becomes part of lokavidya.

Clearly, a community nourishes within it a variety of human creative activities. Knowledge created in all of them together define a world of knowledge in that community. It is natural to suppose that in many ways the community nurtures

autonomy of actions of its members. A moral code of behaviour and rules adhered to more, or less willfully by all would exist in the community. It may be conjectured that the world of moral knowledge thus defined comprises notions with actual community-wide presence. This is a universality as it will incorporate a world view of the community and as it guides abstraction from the imagination, and the creation making up autonomous actions.

Therefore, autonomous spaces are fundamentally spaces defined by the autonomous activities of such communities with their knowledge worlds. In principle, inasmuch as they have their own universalities, they are ontological entities with diverging knowledge worlds in the sense of divergence as defined by Stengers. The dialogic order proposed to further autonomy movements makes sense, shedding its liberal cloak only if this admitted; and justice proper displaces minimal justice as basis of dialog. Also, the notion of "autonomy of autonomies" suggested in the context of Kashmir would find an

Autonomies Challenging the Nation State

The knowledge view of autonomy and autonomous spaces would discern such spaces everywhere. This is a far cry from the position that India has shown no viable non-territorial autonomies. Moreover, autonomy movements are properly recognized as those opposed to ontological reduction and an epistemological domination of their spaces, led by a nation state, be it secular-liberal, or Hindu-nationalistic.

Farmers' movement is such a movement, though not apparently raising any demands normally associated with autonomy movements. However, it has shown itself to be a knowledge movement in its open rejection of the received wisdom on liberal economics and agriculture. It explicitly rejects the basis of an equally liberal tolerance toward peasantry – the assumption of its inevitable disappearance as a

community, while exposing what is perceived to be designs of the state to forcibly destroy it as a community.

Notes

1. "They can make laws regarding (a) allotment, occupation, and use or setting apart of land other than land in reserved forests, for the purpose of agriculture or grazing or residential purposes or for non-agricultural purposes or any other purpose likely to promote the interests of villages or towns, (b) management of any forest, not being a reserved forest, within the autonomous council area, (c) use of any canal or water course for the purpose of agriculture, (d) regulation of the practice of jhum (shifting cultivation) or any other form of shifting cultivation, (e) establishment of village and town committees or councils and the regulation of any other matter relating to village or town administration, (f) running the village or town police, (g) matters of public health and sanitation and maintenance of facilities, (h) regulation of inheritance of property, marriage, divorce, and social customs, (i) constitution of village councils or courts for trial of suits and cases between parties (but only those belonging to Scheduled Tribes), (j) establishment, construction, and management of primary schools, dispensaries, markets, cattle sheds, ferries, fisheries, roads, road transport, and waterways, and (k) assessment and collection of land revenue. With a view to encourage local participation in development, the Mizoram government has also entrusted 20 additional functions to the district councils for execution.", Subir Bhaumik and Jayany Bhattacharya, *Autonomy in the Northeast: the Hills of Tripura and Mizram*, in *The Politics of Autonomy - Indian Experiences*, Ed. Ranabir Smaddar, Sage Publ. 2005.
2. "In India the political struggles of autonomy led to a wide variety of constitutional forms, in the introduction of which, the colonial administrative practices too had an equal hand. Indeed, the Indian experience is the most instructive because of its diversity and range, the extent of colonial innovations, multiple forms of autonomy, the complex path of constitutionalism, a wide variety of accords, the persistent demands for self-determination in various forms, and an unyielding and innovative state determined to keep the destined nation intact while keeping others from gaining nationhood. It is also important to recall in this context, the political and constitutional ways in which the minorities have been negotiated by the Indian state by granting mainly religious minorities limited form of autonomy

in personal laws and cultural autonomy ...", pp. 18-19, Ranbir Samaddar The Politics of Autonomy - Indian Experiences

3. "In short, we have in the Indian instance, the most extraordinary juxtaposition of measures of autonomy and a relentless centralization. Seen from another angle, we have here, the most relentless constitutionalism and governmentalization of the principle of autonomy and the most insistent demand of the political subject to gain recognition. It is also a narrative of how and when a group refuses to accept at some historical moment, the identity of a minority and claims the status of a people, a nation.", pp. 20-21, Ranbir Samaddar, The Politics of Autonomy - Indian Experiences
4. Ranbir Samaddar, p. 10 Introduction to Politics of Autonomy
5. Ranbir Samaddar, p. 19 ...
6. Sanjay Chaturvedi, p.167, The Ethno and the Geo: A New Look at Kashmir's Autonomy, in The Politics of Autonomy - Indian Experiences