
UNIT 9 ETHNICITY AS A BASIS OF STRATIFICATION

Structure

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9.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you should be able to:

- outline the different conceptions of ethnicity based on biological descent, cultural homogeneity and ethnic self consciousness;
- explain the rise of ethnicity with the help of cultural ethnicity and political ethnicity approaches;
- discuss the phenomena of ethnic stratification and ethnic nationalism; and
- differentiate between Nation and ethnic group and nationality and ethnicity and describe the rise of ethno-nationalism (with special reference to India)

9.1 INTRODUCTION

In the last three decades words like ethnic group, ethnic identity and ethnicity have become common place, being mentioned not only in academic analysis but also in the mass media. In fact, in recent times ethnicity is among the most common categories that present day human beings use to establish their ideas about who they are, to evaluate their experiences and behaviour and to understand the world around them. Although in some societies ethnic categories and ties are more important than others, yet ethnicity is among the most universal fundamental concepts of the twentieth century world. It is an omnipresent phenomenon in both developing and developed countries, past and present. The tribes, villages, bands etc., which until recently were considered the features of the third world societies only, are now becoming integral parts of new state structures even in the modern societies, being transformed into ethnic groups with varying degree of cultural uniqueness. As a consequence, the phenomenon of ethnicity has gained theoretical and investigative importance.

9.2 ETHNICITY: HISTORY, DEFINITION AND ELEMENTS

We will now discuss the history, definition and elements of ethnicity.

9.2.1 History of the Concept

The word ethnic has a long history. It is derived from the Greek word *ethnos* meaning nation which is not depicted as a political entity but as a unit of persons with common blood or descent. Its adjectival form *ethnikos* used in Latin as *ethnicus* referred to heathens, the 'others' who did not share the faith. In English, the term referred for a long time to some one who was neither Christian nor Jew, i.e., a pagan or heathen. In other words, ethnics were those 'others' who are not 'us'. By the twentieth century its meaning changed again with reassertion of its Greek roots indicating the end of the 'them vs us' idea, (*them* or the *others* being ethnics). Now it is used as a particular way to define not only others but also ourselves (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998).

Oommen (1990) using the French version of ethnics, namely, *ethnie* defines them as a people characterised by a common history, tradition, language and life style. However, he also adds the feature of 'uprootedness from home' to this definition. In other words, for him, ethnicity emerges when people are uprooted from their homeland due to conquest, colonization or immigration and diverse groups come into contact with each other in a new setting. If such displaced people are away from their homeland and yet continue to follow their 'native' life style, they are ethnics.

9.3 EARLY CONCEPTIONS OF ETHNICITY

A look at the literature reveals three popular conceptions of ethnicity: biological, cultural and psychological. The biological conception is based on a common *genetic* descent. In this sense, ethnicity has been treated as synonymous with race. In many earlier works (MacCrone, 1937; Dollard, 1937; Furnivall, 1972; Smith, 1965) biological factors have been considered to be the elements constituting ethnicity and emphasis was laid on the origins of race and racism in relation to colonialism. In this approach the cultural aspect of ethnicity was totally ignored. The second conception of ethnicity involved a new thinking which differentiated race from ethnicity. This view treated race as a *cultural* phenomenon (Burgess, 1978). Here the mere sharing of physical traits was not seen as a sufficient condition for defining an ethnic group. Rather, the symbolic differences among groups became the bases of ethnicity-with values, customs, historical back ground, life style, territory and most importantly, language and religion being the prominent symbols of ethnicity.

The third conception of ethnicity defines it in terms of the consciousness of a common identity. Both common descent and cultural distinctiveness, individually and together, were no longer considered enough to constitute ethnicity. Instead, *awareness* among the members of a group regarding their similarity to each other and differences from other groups was what gave them an ethnic identity (Patterson, 1953; Connor, 1978). What is *there* was not important but what is *perceived* and *believed* was seen as the basis of ethnicity. Simply put, sharing of physical, attitudinal, behavioural and cultural features was not considered sufficient to foster ethnic feelings. The group must also *perceive* themselves as distinct from others, that is, the members must define themselves as a we group.

9.3.1 Ethnic Groups

Paul Brass (1991) discusses three ways of defining ethnic groups: a) in terms of objective attributes, b) by reference to subjective feelings and c) in relation to behaviour. The first definition implies that there are some distinguishing *objective cultural features* that separate one group from the other-language, territory, religion, dress etc. All these are called *ethnic markers* through which distinctions between one ethnic group and another are emphasized between these are maintained. So, while the ethnic groups may interact with one another for the purpose of, say, economic activity, the objective ethnic markers ensure the continuity of separate group identity. The second aspect, i.e., presence of subjective feelings implies the existence of an *ethnic self-consciousness*. As mentioned earlier, at the base of ethnic affinity lies real or assumed common identity. The important thing to keep in

mind is that the fact of common descent is not as important as the belief in it. It is not what is that is critical but *what people perceive*. In other words, ethnicity is a subjective construct, it is how we see ourselves. The third dimension, namely, the behavioural one, points to the existence of concrete, specific ways in which ethnic groups do or do not behave in relation to, or in interaction with other groups. In this sense, the normative behaviour of an ethnic group may include practices related to kinship, marriage, friendship, rituals etc.

Thus, an ethnic group is a collectivity which is perceived by others in society as being different in terms of language, religion, race, ancestral home, culture etc., whose members perceive themselves as different from others and who participate in shared activities built around their actual or mythical common origin and culture. On the basis of these variables a group can be ranged from being barely ethnic to fully ethnic. It is a collectivity within a larger society characterised by elements like real or imaginary common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements such as kinship patterns, religious affiliations, language or dialect forms, etc. Also imperative is some consciousness of kind among the group members. Consequently, most definitions of ethnicity and ethnic groups focus on objective and involuntary external markers, as well as, subjective and voluntary internal consciousness as its major elements.

9.3.2 Major Elements of Ethnicity

Of the two major elements of ethnicity, namely, the presence of objective external markers and subjective awareness, the latter-“consciousness”-is considered more significant since genetic and cultural similarities are seen as the ‘givens’ of social existence. However, as I have discussed in an earlier article (Sabbarwal, 1992), this is only a partial explanation of ethnicity since it does not answer a fundamental question, namely, what creates this consciousness in the first place? Some like Kuper and Smith (1969) and Gastil (1978) hold that when different ethnic groups come into contact with each other and interact with each other ethnic consciousness or awareness arises. However, this too, is not a satisfactory explanation as mere contact between groups need not always result in ethnic awareness. To overcome this problem, a distinction, therefore, has to be drawn *cultural ethnicity* and *political ethnicity*.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Write a note on ethnic groups. Use about five lines for your answer.

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- 2) Write a note on the political perspective on ethnicity. Use about five lines for your answer.

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9.4 CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

More recently, there have crystallized two major perspectives on ethnicity: anthropological and political. The *anthropological/cultural* approach to ethnicity refers to a belief in shared cultural values and practices. In this sense, ethnic group is identified in terms of cultural phenomena such as common customs, institutions, rituals, language etc. This conception of ethnicity is based on the functionalist view that people need a sense of belonging somewhere which gives them strength to sustain themselves in times of pressures and this is provided by the ethnic identity. It is held that with the emergence of urbanization, economic progress, technological advancement, mass education, mass media etc., the individual faces a loss of tradition and primordial identities. This, however, instead of making ethnic identities weaker, actually results in their reinforcement as in a mass society the individual feels the desperate need for some kind of identity which is smaller than the State but larger than the family.

9.4.1 Ethnicity and Functionalism

It is notable that functionalism did not always advance this idea. In fact, initially it held the view that 'obsolete' ascriptive collectivities like ethnic groups did not 'fit' in the modern societies. The assumption was that in universalistic and achievement-oriented modern industrial societies, ethnic and cultural differences decline, the society as a whole becomes increasingly homogenous and this results in the weakening of ethnic distinctions. Some scholars like Kerr *et al.* (1960), Rostow (1960) and Hyden (1983) attributed it to the homogenizing influence of market (economic) forces. Others like Gellner (1983) said that rise of nationalistic (political) tendencies unified the societies which ultimately resulted in the disappearance of cultural and ethnic differences.

Activity 1

Why does ethnicity not cease to exist in a modern society? Discuss with other students and knowledgeable persons. Note down your findings in a notebook.

Writers like Glazer (1975), however, have contended that not only does ethnicity *not* cease to exist in a modern society, but is actually 'revived' and what's more, the increasing importance of ethnic identities or *ethnicization* can be attributed to the very conditions of modernization. Similarly, Eisenstadt (1973), Murphree (1986) and Wallerstein (1986) point out that they see no visible signs of *de-ethnicization* in the modern world. Rather, one can witness a *resurgence* of particularistic tendencies. Sharma (1990) illustrates this clearly with examples drawn from the Indian society where despite technological, institutional, valuational and behavioural signs of modernization ethnicity reigns supreme. For instance, in terms of food, dress and interior decoration of one's home, being 'ethnic' is considered *chic* (fashionable). Similarly, a "modern" institution like electoral democracy has led to the reawakening of the primordial consciousness of religion, caste etc. In short, the later functionalist writings highlighted the persistence of ethnicity despite, or even because of modernization.



Vegetable Market in Kohima
Courtesy : Prof. Kapil Kumar

9.4.2 Political Perspective in Ethnicity

More popular today, however, is the *political* perspective on ethnicity. It refers to the political awareness and mobilization of a group on ethnic basis, as a result of which certain groups *consciously* seek to assert their ethnicity, even exaggerating their ethnic characteristics to achieve the end of political autonomy or sovereignty. The argument is that the rise of capitalism has caused uneven development leading to reinforcement of parochial loyalties and ethnic self-consciousness. Most of the literature on ethnicity focuses on discrimination and highlights how the perception of unequal distribution of resources by the disadvantaged groups results in the rise of ethnic awareness among them. A minority group, for instance, in a culturally plural society may opt for political ethnicity when it is pushed to the wall by the majority group which tends to be oppressive in pursuit of its privileges. In such a case, minority groups may mobilize or even invent an ethnic identity in an effort to oppose discrimination. Groups may also exploit primordial loyalties for political reasons which may be used by them to advance their political interests and maximise their power. A key example of ethnicity being utilized for representing and advancing the interests of a group is its use in politics where ethnic groups employ ethnicity to make demands in the political arena for alteration in their status, economic well-being, educational opportunity, civil rights etc. Put simply, ethnicity is interest based and ethnic groups are interest groups.

Sharma (1996) has called these two categories *generic* and *emergent* ethnicity. In the generic connotation, it is an identity based on a set of objective cultural markers which help the members of a group differentiate themselves from other groups and be differentiated by the other groups as well. In this sense, an ethnic group is a *bounded cultural group* having certain distinguishing features separating it from other groups. What is highlighted here is the awareness of cultural diversity by different groups. However, when this awareness becomes consciousness of political differentiation, emergent ethnicity is born marked by a process of power struggle.

Box 9.01

The origin and resurgence of ethnicity lie in intergroup contact, that is, when different groups come into one another's sphere of influence. Of course, the shape it takes depends on the conditions in that society. The second point is that ethnicity is used to meet the present demands of survival for the oppressed groups. When subjugated groups find it difficult to tolerate the dominance of others and make efforts to improve their position, ethnicity is generated.

9.5 ETHNIC STRATIFICATION

Stratification is a system whereby people are unequally ranked and rewarded on the basis of wealth, power and prestige. It is part of every society and may take various forms like class, gender, race and, of course, ethnicity. The earlier studies of stratification used to focus on the phenomena of caste and race while gender and ethnicity were treated as side issues. However, of late not only have ethnicity and gender been getting some attention in stratification analysis, but ethnic stratification is even replacing class as the foremost form of social division since now property relations tend to be determined by ethnic ranking instead of it being the other way round. The model of internal colonialism is used to analyse ethnic resurgence and conflicts by highlighting the dominant group's political control over, economic exploitation of and cultural domination over the minority groups, and their ideological justification of this unequal relationship. Ethnic stratification shares a lot of things with the other forms of stratification, such as, ranking, inequality, discrimination, exploitation etc. However, there is one crucial difference. Ethnic groups have the capability to acquire an independent nation, an option which is not available to class and gender groups.

9.5.1 Ethnic Nationalism

Membership of an ethnic group tends to determine a person's status in society. This can occur in two ways. Social rewards like money, prestige and power are often allocated along ethnic lines. Secondly, in most societies one or more ethnic groups dominate others in economic, political and cultural matters. Ethnic politics can, therefore, take the appearance of ethnic stratification resulting in the emergence of ethnic nationalism. As discussed

earlier, ethnic identity may sometimes be related to political necessities and demands. This happens when minority groups try to play the ethnic card in order to acquire a better deal for themselves in a plural society. However, some ethnic groups go a step further and demand a say in the political system or control over a piece of territory or even demand a national status, i.e., country of their own. If they succeed in achieving any of these objectives they become a nationality or a nation (Brass, 1991).

9.5.2 Nation and Ethnic Group

The concepts of nation, nation-state, nationality, national minority etc. arose with the rise of capitalism in Western Europe and spread to the rest of the world. Nation is derived from the Latin word *nasci* meaning to be born and Latin noun *nationem*, i.e., breed or race. It is a historically evolved, stable uniformity of languages, territory, economic life and psychological make up which can be seen in the form of a common culture. More importantly, it is a type of ethnic community which is politicized and has universally accepted group rights in a political system.

Box 9.02

Nation has a variety of meanings—country, society, state and even ethnic group. It has been defined as a country, or the inhabitants of a country united under a single independent government, a State. It is also defined as a people connected by supposed ties of blood which are generally observable in common interests and interrelations. The latter, interestingly, is also the definition of an ethnic group. Often nation and ethnic group are equated or nation is seen as a type of ethnic group characterized by a history or mythology of statehood or a strong desire for statehood. Reinforced by such myths, histories and aspirations nationalism often unites people for ethnic movements in search of higher socio-economic status, independence and autonomy. Thus, the desire of an ethnic community to possess or remember what they once had and wish to repossess, leads to the demands for autonomy and political sovereignty, thereby turning them into a national community.

Oommen (1997) holds that nation and ethnic group share many features but differ on a crucial point, namely, territory. An ethnic group becomes a nation only when it identifies itself with a territory. Contrarily, a nation becomes an ethnic community when the members are separated from their homeland. No single feature of ethnic groups can be identified as being more important than the others. Each gains importance in different situations. But a nation cannot be a nation without territory. Thus, he calls ethnic groups 'passive nations', groups with potential to become nations while nations are 'active ethnicity' as they emerge out of ethnic elements. Bacal (1997) too, offers the terms 'micro-nations' and 'macro-ethnies' for ethnic groups and nations, respectively supporting Oommen's emphasis on territory being the key factor in differentiating the two.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Write on the nexus between nation and ethnic group. Use about five lines for your answer.

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- 2) What is ethno-nationalism? Explain in about five lines.

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9.5.3 Nationalism and Ethnicity

Nationalism refers to the expressed desire of a people to establish and maintain a self-governing political entity. It has proven to be one of the most powerful forces in the contemporary world, both a creator and destroyer of modern states. Nationality and ethnicity are related, yet different. Ethnicity may become nationalism and nationalism is always based on real or assumed ethnic ties. Yet, at the heart of nationalism lie the three themes of autonomy, unity and identity. Autonomy implies an effort by a people to determine their own destiny and free themselves from external constraint. Unity means ending internal divisions and uniting, and identity involves an effort by a group to find and express their authentic cultural heritage and identity (Cornell and Hartman, 1998). Thus, nationalism is a form of ethnicity in which a particular ethnic identity is crystallized and institutionalized by acquiring a political agenda. Nations are created when ethnic groups in a multi-ethnic state are transformed into a self-conscious political entities. Hence, it is the goals of sovereignty and self-determination that set nationalism apart from ethnicity.

Activity 2

Discuss the nexus between nationalism and ethnicity with students at the study centre. Also talk with people knowledgeable in the subject. Put down your findings in your notebook.

9.5.4 Development of a Nationality

According to Brass (1991) there are two steps in the formation of a nationality. First there is transformation of an ethnic category into a community which involves changes like creation of a self-conscious linguistic unity, formation of a caste association etc. This happens in the early stages of modernization in multi-ethnic societies where social divisions of various kinds are still prevalent. The second stage involves the articulation and acquisition of social, economic and political rights for the members of the group or for the group as a whole. When the group succeeds by its own efforts in achieving and maintaining group rights through political action and political mobilization, it goes beyond ethnicity and establishes itself as a nationality.

However, why does ethnicity become nationality? This question is answered by the *relative deprivation approach* which focuses our attention on the feeling of frustration caused by the differences between what people feel they legitimately deserve and what they actually get. Similarly, when subjugated groups fail to achieve success according to the norms established by the dominant group the nature of their response tends to be ethnic antagonism which may take the form of a) struggle of the indigenous people's right to their land and culture, b) efforts by minority groups to procure equal economic, political and cultural rights; c) competition by ethnic groups for obtaining scarce resources; and d) movements for a separate nation.

9.5.5 Ethno-Nationalism: The Indian Case

Sharma (1991) has described how ethnic antagonism has posed four serious challenges to the Indian state. These are:

Casteism-A curious mix of ethnic identity and modern interests in which the ethnic group uses the caste ideology to further its economic and political interests, e.g., a political party asking for votes of a particular caste group.

Communalism-the "unholy" alliance between religion and politics in which religion may be used for political or economic gains, e.g., the Hindutva concept used by the BJP.

Nativism-the 'sons of the soil' concept in which regional identities become the source of ethnic strife, e.g., the movement in Assam to expel the 'foreigners' from Bengal.

Ethno-nationalism-the transformation of an ethnic group to a nationality which may start demanding autonomous governance in a particular territory or even secession, separation and recognition as a sovereign nation, e.g., the movements in Kashmir and Punjab (Khalistan).

9.6 LET US SUM UP

The final question is under what conditions does ethnic diversity lead to conflict and

discrimination and when does it result in cultural affluence and social adaptability. Conceptually, ethnicity is a search for an identity by a group and a demand that this identity be publicly acknowledged. However, it also has a practical aim for that group, namely, the demand for progress, for a rising standard of living, for a more effective political order, greater social justice and of playing a part in the large arena of the world politics of exercising influence among the nations.

Ethnic lines will not disappear in the near future and ethnicity will persist. Ethnic behaviour, attitudes and identities have been, are being and will be determined by not only what goes on among the ethnics themselves but also by the developments in the larger society and by how society treats ethnics. In most multi-ethnic societies the various ethnic groups vary in wealth, power and status and ethnicity is a major factor in stratification despite weakening traditions. As a result, most individuals will continue to think of their ethnic group first when they examine their own identity. The solution is to harmonize the individual, ethnic and humanwide identities. All societies must create an environment which protects the right to ethnicity, strongly supports the concept of mutual respect and also works at making ethnic identity a relatively small part of a person's identity. The ethnic distinctiveness must not be given preference over the equally crucial issues of human individuality on the one hand, and identification with the national society on the other. A balance has to be reached so that ethnic resurgence does not endanger individual selfhood and national integrity and, in turn, individualism and nationalism do not pose a threat to ethnic identities.

9.7 KEY WORDS

Cultural Ethnicity	:	The anthropological way of defining ethnicity in terms of shared cultural values and practices.
Cultural Markers	:	Objective cultural features like language, religion, dress etc. which differences between groups are emphasised and distances maintained.
Emergent Ethnicity	:	When the cultural ethnic identity is used for political differentiation and gain.
Ethnic Consciousness	:	The subjective perception of a group's members that they are a collectivity different from others.
Ethnic Group	:	A collectivity which is perceived by others in society as being different in terms of language, religion, race, ancestral home, culture etc. whose members also perceive themselves as different from others and who participate in shared activities built around a real or imaginary shared descent and culture.
Ethnic Nationalism	:	The phenomenon of ethnic groups demanding a political and administrative autonomy, a national status or a country of their own.
Ethnic Stratification	:	The unequal distribution of financial, power and cultural resources on ethnic lines in a society.
Ethnicity	:	A shared (real or imagined) racial, linguistic or cultural identity of a social group.
Generic Ethnicity	:	An identity based on a set of objective cultural features.
International Colonialism	:	A concept used to describe political and economic inequalities between regions within the same society and the underprivileged status and exploitation of minority groups within a society.
Nation	:	A country or populace of a country connected supposedly by common blood ties and under a single government.
Nationalism	:	Expression of the desire of a people to establish a self-governing political entity
Political Ethnicity	:	Political awareness and conscious mobilization of groups on ethnic lines.

9.8 FURTHER READINGS

Bacal, Azril. 1997. "Citizenship and National Identity in Latin America: The Persisting Salience of Race and Ethnicity", in T.K. Oommen (ed.) *Citizenship and National Identity: From Colonialism to Globalism*. N. Delhi: Sage Publications.

Brass, Paul R. 1991. *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Burgess, M.E. 1978. "The Resurgence of Ethnicity: Myth or Reality", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 1(3).

9.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) An ethnic group has some objective culture features that separate it from other groups. Secondly it possesses an ethnic self consciousness. Thus an ethnic group is a collectivity which perceives itself as different from other and which perceives itself from being different in terms of language, religion, ancestral home culture etc.
- 2) The political perspective on ethnicity refers to the political awareness and mobilization of a group on an ethnic basis. On this basis certain groups consciously seek to assert their ethnicity even exaggerating their ethnicity to achieve political autonomy or even sovereignty.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Nation is a historically evolved stable uniformity of languages, temporary, economic life and psychological make up in the form of a culture. Thus nation is a type of ethnic community which is politicized and has rights in a political system. Nation and ethnic groups share many features but differ on territory. This an ethnic group becomes a nation when it identifies itself with a temporary.
- 2) Ethnic antagonism poses many threats to the state including, casteism, communalism and nativism. Above all the threat comes from ethno-nationalism which is the transformation of an ethnic group into a nationality. This is being attempted and has been attempted in India in the past.