

Ethnicity: A Conceptual Understanding of a Post Cold War Phenomenon

Dr. Aparna Agashe
Associate Professor
Department of Political Science
MES' Abasaheb Garware College
Pune, Maharashtra, India

Mailing Address
2, Laxminarayan Apartments
1098/19, Model Colony,
Shivajinagar, Pune-411016
Maharashtra, India

ABSTRACT

Ethnicity has become an all pervading phenomena in recent times especially after the end of the cold war. Contemporary world politics has to face the challenge of ethnic aspirations that cannot be accommodated within the state. This leads to conflict based on ethnicity. The post-cold war world has witnessed a rise in internal conflicts within the boundaries of the State. Ethnicity is therefore, naturally linked to conflicts. In this context, it becomes important to understand the meaning of ethnicity and develop a conceptual framework to explain this new challenge. This paper seeks to trace the study of ethnicity from the perspective of changing power structures right since the historical times. The purpose of this paper is to provide a holistic understanding of the multidimensionality of ethnicity and how it assumed different meanings at different time periods.

KEY WORDS: Ethnicity, Race, Stereotypes, Identity, Ethnic Groups

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I. INTRODUCTION

The post-cold war world has witnessed a rise in conflicts which are termed as ethnic conflicts. These conflicts are mostly intra state in character. In international politics, problems of ethnicity have come to the forefront affecting and challenging the state system as it exists today. The state as the supreme point of loyalty of the individual over his other loyalties like race and religion has been challenged. The proliferation of ethnic conflicts has made the process of conflict resolution very significant. This compels us to give serious consideration to the study of ethnicity and the various dimensions that are attached to it.

Ethnicity is commonly defined as a sense of belonging to a group. It is constituted by factors of race, religion, language and so on that are mostly symbolic in nature. The ethnic group believes in these symbolic factors and this creates their ethnic identity. This ethnic identity is recognised as the group identity to which all the members owe their allegiance. To understand the emerging significance of ethnicity as a tool of interest articulation and elite competition for power, it is necessary to gain clarity about what we mean by ethnicity as a concept. This paper seeks to develop a conceptual understanding of ethnicity,

The methodology used is a documentary study method that is mainly historical and analytical in nature. An attempt to contribute to the understanding of ethnicity by using qualitative research techniques is made. Several scholarly studies on ethnicity that are primary to the development of this idea were referred to and the ideas were posed against one another to arrive at a general understanding of the term and its significance in recent times.

II. ETHNICITY: A CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Ethnicity, as a concept, has existed since the ancient times when groups or communities were constituted on kinship ties. As a term, however, it is of recent origin. It was used by David Riesman in 1953 later cited in Glazer and Moynihan, (1975, 5). As all concepts in social sciences, the term has not been able to acquire a uniform definition that could be applied to all times. Ethnicity as a term is a recent addition to the English language. It is derived from the Greek word 'ethnos' which means 'pagans' or 'others'. In early Greek

usage, the term was used to describe large, undifferentiated animals or warriors. It was not used for groups sharing a culture, an origin and so on (Tonkin, McDonald and Chapman, 1989, 11-17). The Greeks were not 'ethnos'. The term 'ethnos' was used to describe the non-Greek barbarians. They were considered to be the 'other'. They were groups that lived in a primitive culture (Phadnis, 1989, 13). Something that was very different from one's own was ethnic. The usage, therefore, had certain negative overtones.

Moreover the term 'ethnos' was used along with the term 'genos' which was used to describe the Greeks. Hence, initially there was a dichotomy between the 'ethnos'-the non-Greeks and the 'genos'-the Greeks. These images referred to the 'other' as against the 'self' with the 'self' not only treated as different from the 'other' but also better than the 'other'. The ethnikos were considered to be the barbarians who spoke a different language that was not comprehensible and were also uncivilised. They were beyond any kind of an order or decency (Tonkin, McDonald and Chapman, 1989, 11-17). The non-structured, peripheral people were the 'ethnics'.

The change in the definition of the term to include the 'self' rather than just the "other" occurred during the Ottoman rule. The orthodox Christians who previously defined the concepts of the 'self' and the 'other' were now themselves the subordinated groups in the society under the Ottomans. By the end of the Ottoman rule, the Greek word 'ethnos' became a self-realising, self-defining entity and was no longer restricted to the 'other'.

Thus, one sees how this distinction between the "self" and the "other" forms a very essential part of the whole discourse on ethnicity since the ancient times. Ethnicity is still perceived to be relations between groups, which consider themselves to be different from others and are also considered by others as being different. However, since ethnicity deals with the familiarity-strangeness element what is ethnic to one may not be ethnic to another. What is ethnic looked at from one point of view may not be ethnic looked at from another point of view. Ethnicity depends upon where we are positioning ourselves at a particular point of time with regard to different issues and with respect to different communities.

III. ETHNIC GROUP FORMATION

Ethnicity is more commonly defined as the quality by which one belongs to an ethnic group or the 'essence of an ethnic group'. Ethnicity can be regarded as a sense of ethnic identity. It means a condition of belonging to an ethnic group that fosters common identity. Ethnic identity refers to the symbolic affiliations of the people. This symbolism is represented by the ethnic marker which in turn is known as ethnic identity. The identity is the marker through which an individual can be recognised. Ethnic groups as interest groups are organised around these markers. When interests are articulated on the basis of ethnic identity, it is called ethnicity. Ethnicity is merely the awareness of these markers and their application within the arena of the state and institutions of power. Ethnicity refers to the politicised identity of the individual.

The new found importance given to an ethnic group is mainly due to the expansion in the role, size as also the change in the status of ethnic groups. Initially the term was used to describe minority groups. Ethnic groups were often defined by scholars as 'a fraction of a 'whole' (Schermerhorn, 1970, 12-14). Ethnic now not only refers to the groups living in primitive, exotic cultures but also to all the groups in industrialised societies that have some primordial ties as their basis.

The definition of the term ethnicity and ethnic groups has been transformed to include not just groups that live "on the periphery of the society i.e. marginal and subgroups expected to assimilate, disappear, survive an exotic culture" but they now also include groups that constitute the majority in the society (Glazer and Moynihan, 1975, 5). They are considered by some scholars to constitute only the minority groups in the society or at best majority groups that enjoy minority status or are subordinated. Ethnicity, however, refers to both the subordinate and dominant groups in the society, to the minority and the majority.

Any group which possesses certain symbolic elements that are recognised by the group members as differentiating them from the other groups can claim to be called an ethnic group, be it a majority- minority, dominant-subordinate group. The symbolic elements include a name, common culture, sense of solidarity and perceived links with a common homeland. The most important variable among these is common culture, which distinguishes an ethnic group from other types of groups.

Therefore the term ethnicity has both objective and subjective dimensions. Objectively defined, it implies a group sharing certain common characteristics like language, religion, culture and kinship. There is a cultural basis that divides one group from the other. Subjectively defined, it is a group whose members feel amongst themselves a sense of belonging due to language, race, and colour and also see themselves as different from the others. The possession of symbolic elements is the objective dimension and the recognition of it by the members of the group and the others is the subjective dimension. The objective characteristics are the primordial ties of religion, language, and race having their base in culture whereas the subjective ties depend upon an individual's interpretation of the same.

Ethnicity can be regarded as the feeling of belonging among the group members based on ties of kinship and other emotional, sentimental attachments and the recognition of the members of being different from the rest. Similarly, an ethnic group is described by Urmila Phadnis as a group of people who have an association with a specified territory, a shared belief . (Phadnis, 1989, 14).

On the basis of the above, it can be observed that a monocultural society is not an ethnic society. A complete awareness of the “self” is possible only through an awareness about the “other”. A mobilisation of the “self” group vis a vis the “other” is most essential in the entire discourse on ethnicity. A sense of oneness coupled with difference from others is a predominant phenomenon of an ethnic society. In a monocultural society there is no sense of the other and hence a complete awareness of the self is also lacking.

IV. CULTURE AND ETHNICITY

The term ethnicity is usually taken to refer to cultural rather than biological attributes, despite the recent revival of interest in “kin selection and genetic inheritance” as explanations of ethnic solidarity (Van Den Berghe, 1995, 401-411). Culture and ethnicity are very closely connected. Ethnicity is defined in terms of the objective cultural markers. The traditional approach to an understanding of ethnicity has been to define it in terms of the objective cultural structure of the society. Culture has been defined in several ways. Culture includes general attitudes and views of life that lend a particular place to all people in the world. It is a quality acquired through socialisation, habits and thought. It embodies the ideas and norms shared by most members of the group.

The ethnic group is also perceived by its members as a “pseudo kinship group”, which promises to provide the emotional security as offered by the family (Brown, 1994, 258-265). Culture on its own, however, is not enough to define and explain ethnicity. Groups vastly different may live harmoniously as against groups having the same culture. The circumstances along with culture determine the volatility of ethnic groups. The scope of ethnicity has therefore expanded to not just include cultural/racial affiliations but all types of emotions that generate a feeling of oneness among groups.

V. SIGNIFICANCE OF MYTHS AND STEREOTYPES

The ethnic bonds can be distinguished from other types of human bonds due to the collective historical memories that are shared by the members of the group, the memories of past experiences and the symbols and myths that are derived through them. Myth making is a part of all societies. The ethnic ties remain in imagination only and they are strengthened through the propagation of myths and symbols. The possession of these attributes does not by themselves create loyalties but the attributes provide outward manifestations and symbols with which to sustain the belief in common kinship. Ethnicity has to function within limits. The linguistic, religious and racial differences along with the kind of history and traditions pursued in the society is the ‘raw material’ that ethnicity thrives on (Brown, 1994, 258-265).

The formation of ethnic groups also brings with it the formation of boundaries. One group is distinguished from another through boundaries. Once boundaries are formed there are also several ways through which they are maintained. Cultural categories or markers are the methods through which boundaries are maintained and changed. The specific differences of language and race between groups are the index markers or categories. The boundary marking features say who is a member of what group and what minimal “cultural markers” are involved in membership (Nash, 1989, 10-15). The cultural items involved in membership are the index markers. These index markers should be visible to the members of the group as well as the non-members. Myths and symbols are derived from these cultural markers. It is these cultural markers that are caricatured and stereotyped most often by the elite within the group.

Stereotypes are generalised knowledge about social categories that are used implicitly to evaluate these categories. Walter Lippman first used this concept (Lippmann, 1922, 3-7). The caricatures and stereotypes drawn are more often negative than positive. This is because the values of the groups within are used and applied to judge and evaluate the other groups. In-group values are used as a yardstick to differentiate and evaluate out-groups in the process of self-definition (Hagendoorn, 1993, 26-51). This fosters a negative out-group stereotype. On the basis of the stereotypes the groups are hierarchically arranged.

Stereotypes often create misunderstandings. When a person, who stands out distinctly because of his dress, colour of skin or because of any other attribute behaves aggressively, these attributes and the behaviour of the person are linked. These links are further kept in mind and the stereotype memorises these aggressive signals. Negative behaviour of the self is explained externally but that of the others is attributed to certain internally related traits and motives (Nash, 1989, 10-15). It is again the elite who focuses upon this link and projects it as such to the individual.

VI. SURVIVAL OF ETHNIC GROUPS

Ethnic group survival depends upon the extent to which the members share the feeling of common ties. Survival in totality of the ethnic group is not possible. When the future generations to a certain extent retain the memories of the past and believe in the past historical myths, ethnic groups are said to have survived. It happens due to several factors like the degree of autonomy that the community enjoys, the political leadership of the community, the will of the community to survive, the geographical and the demographic composition of the community, the resources available with the community for its survival and the availability of networks and channels of communication among the members of the community.

The sense among the group members of being distinct from other groups is nurtured by the elite. This ensures the long term survival of the ethnic group. The members of an ethnic community feel that they possess what Max Weber called 'irreplaceable values', that must be preserved against internal threats as well as external domination and that it is the duty of the community members to extend its cultural values to others (Smith, 1992, 436-456).

The process of ethnic group formation is both deductive and inductive. An ethnic group may be formed out of nothing. Members may be initially scattered and then develop a sense of common identity leading to the formation of an ethnic group or a previously formed group may acquire certain ethnic features to strengthen group bonds. The people having the same set of values and ideas belong to the same group. They would surely pursue "different patterns of life and institutionalise different forms of behaviour when faced with different opportunities offered in different environments" (Barth, 1969, 10-19). Perceived cultural similarity is an important feature of an ethnic group. This perception is forged by the elite.

Survival of ethnic groups depends upon survival of the boundaries. Membership of an ethnic group is based on how much members identify with each other and differ from the rest and less on the objective factors. Therefore any study of ethnic groups must begin with a study of the boundaries and then of the cultural categories that they enclose. The social behaviour and attitudes of the people within the boundary are based upon certain common values and also a common understanding of these values. These values also enjoin a continued perception of differences with others. Ethnic groups interact with one another but they can survive only if their interaction with others in no way is allowed to negate or dilute their differences with the other group.

VII. RACE AND ETHNICITY

Most often ethnicity is considered to be synonymous with race. However the two cannot be treated as one and the same thing. A race is a biological phenomenon with a number of characteristics that are distinct. It, thus, signifies a biological category related more with physical traits. All racial groups are ethnic but all ethnic groups are not racial. Race is merely one of the categories of an ethnic group.

Moreover there is a terminological difference between the two. Race is based on an objective criteria of kinship ties. Race assumes that personality is linked with physical characteristics that are hereditary. Ethnicity on the other hand is based on the subjective criteria. The familiar bias towards 'difference' and 'otherness' is evident in all issues related to ethnicity. Race merely categorises people whereas ethnicity is used for group identification (Eriksen, 1993, 3-7). Ideas of race may or may not form a part of ethnic group identification but they definitely can be used for this purpose.

Ethnicity is also different from a class group. As already stated ethnicity is defined on the basis of culture. Class, on the other hand, is defined on the basis of property or acquired status. Ethnic groups can be ranked and unranked and enjoy equal status but a class relationship is necessarily ranked hierarchically. Though correlation and interrelation between ethnicity and class is possible, they have to be distinguished analytically.

What is difficult to demarcate is the difference between an ethnic group and a tribal group since a tribal group also has a strong cultural basis. Tribes are a distinct cultural group with a strong sense of identity. They possess an indigenous social and political organisation. They are a self-contained socio-political organisational unit within the wider framework of the state. The tribal rules and regulations are more adhered to by them than that of the state. On the other hand unlike a tribal group an ethnic group may not have its own socio-political structure.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Ethnicity is a multidimensional and complex phenomena. It is related to a sense of belonging that becomes the most important aspect of an ethnic group. It is not related only to race but also encompasses the concepts of class and all other emotional and cultural categories. Although it is based on several objective categories its significance in the political sphere is due to the subjective understanding of ethnicity by the group members. The hierarchical arrangement of ethnic groups comes from the myths and stereotypes about one another that are created and believed to be the true representation of that ethnic group.

The whole idea of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ is attached to a hierarchical arrangement of power. It is the dominant group who dictates the hierarchical order of ethnic self-realisation. The ‘genos’ previously considered to be superior due to a shift in the positions of power became a subordinated group to the ‘ethnos’ who are now considered to be the superior group. Categorisation and stratification are closely attached to the power structures that exist at a point of time. The conversion of the ‘genos’ to a subordinate being and the ‘ethnos’ to a superior being is associated with the overturning of orthodox Christianity by the Ottomans in the power hierarchy. It can be said that the conceptual understanding of ideas depends upon the dominant group in the polity. The dominant group determines the predominant idea at different points of time. Ideas and our understanding of them are dynamic. Perceptions change with the change in power structures and circumstances.

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