

Understanding Ethnicity

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Abstract

Many distinct ethnic and cultural groups existed in the world since ancient times. Their origin can be traced back to ancient Indian civilization. Today they are to be found in everywhere. Although multi-racial and multi-cultural societies have existed earlier also, systematic examination of the phenomenon began in west in the eighteenth century and was mostly from the angle of race and race relations only.¹ It became a potentially significant and critical issue only with the advent of nation-states expressing and enhancing their specific national cultures. This posed the problems of ethnic minorities, assimilation, discrimination and rights in the west. It led to many political upheavals, boundary changes and inter- state tensions. Till early 20th century ethnicity remained latent due to existence of more salient and more burning socio-economic issues. This situation changed after Second World War as people became more aware of their ethnic identities and their differences with others due to post-war expansions in contacts and communications.² At this time many Afro-Asian countries became independent and faced ethnic conflicts in the process of nation building.

It was hoped that this was a temporary problem which would automatically disappear with industrialization and modernization. However ethnic or ethno-national loyalties remained quite strong not only in developing but also in developed countries which increased academic interest in the phenomena. However, it is important to have conceptual clarity regarding various terms like ethnicity, ethnic group, minority group, interest group, ethno nation, nation, nationality etc.

Keywords: Ethnicity; Ethnic group; Minority group; Interest group; Ethno nation; Nation; nationality.

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INTRODUCTION

Meaning: The meaning of the term ethnic has changed many times in the west. Whereas it first meant heathen nations beyond western civilization, and later alien minorities within western countries, it now means metaphysical or imaginary descent groups which are universal to mankind.³ However, scholars have defined an



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ethnic group in three ways: objective, subjective and syncretic or composite.⁴

The objectivists led by Yulian Bromley and Fredrick Barth assume that through no specific attribute is invariably associated with all ethnic categories, there must be some distinguishing feature that clearly separates one group of people from another, whether that feature or features be language, territory, religion, colour, diet, dress or any of them.⁵

The subjectivists argue that cultural markers are only the manifestation of ethnic identity distinctiveness. What is more important is the self and group related feeling of distinctiveness of identity and its recognition by others. Thus subjectivists attach importance to subjective feelings. As Max Weber opines that ethnic groups have entertain a subjective belief in their common descent.⁶

The syncretists insist that a proper linkage between the subjectivist and objectivist view is the best. They are against the pre-eminence of subjective over objective factors or vice-versa. Gordon, Shibutani and Kwan, Schermerhorn, De Vos and Romanucci, and Royce have defined an ethnic group on this basis.⁷ According to Milton Gordon, "the term ethnic group is defined or set off by race, religion, or national origin, or some combination of these categories."⁸ All of these categories have a common socio-psychological referent, in that all of them serve to create, through historical circumstances, a sense of people hood for groups.⁹

Schermerhorn defines an ethnic group as "a collectivity existing within a larger society, having a real or fictional common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic element defined as the epitome of their people hood. Examples of such symbolic elements are kinship patterns, physical contiguity (as in localism or sectionalism), religious affiliation, language or dialect form, tribal affiliation, nationality, phenotypical features, or any combination of these."¹⁰ According to De Vos and Romanucci-Ross, "an ethnic group is a self-perceived group of people who hold in common a set of traditions not shared by the others with whom they are in contact. Such traditions typically include "folk" religious beliefs and practices, language, a sense of historical continuity, and common ancestry or place or origin."¹¹

In the words of Anya Peterson Royce "An 'ethnic group' is a reference group invoked by people who

share a common historical style, based on overt features and values, and who, through the process of interaction with others, identify themselves as sharing the style."¹² Among the Indian scholars Urmila Phadnis has defined an ethnic group on the syncretic basis. She writes that an ethnic group is a historically formed aggregate of people having a real or imaginary association with a specified territory, a shared cluster of beliefs and values connoting its distinctiveness in relation to similar groups, and recognized as such by others.¹³ However she makes it clear that, it is not a monolith. It has vertical and horizontal differentiations.

Ethnicity provides a group 'a quality and a character.' It is actually the summation of its impulses and motivations for power and recognition.¹⁴ Jackson makes a distinction between ethnic group and ethnic category. To him *ethnic categories* are more or less permanent and unchanging (or very slow changing) sociological phenomena, whereas ethnic groups are sociopolitical artifacts and therefore historical entities that are subject to considerable change. While *ethnic group* can be reorganized, regulated and even destroyed, ethnic categories are highly resistant to political determination.¹⁵ Although everyone can be assigned an ethnic category of some kind, not all are conscious of their ethnic membership. This consciousness is imperative for the formation of an ethnic group.¹⁶ Here it is important to differentiate it from race as well. The main difference between the two is that an ethnic group is socially defined on the basis of cultural criteria while a *racial group* is socially defined on the basis of physical criteria.¹⁷ Ethnic is also different from *caste* as understood in the west. In the western understanding caste cannot exist in itself; it requires vertical hierarchy to be intelligible. While ethnic collectivities within a plural society are horizontally aligned collectivities of which none possesses a generally acknowledged claim to superiority.¹⁸ In Indian perspective caste was just an occupational grouping.

A *class structure* is a vertical arrangement of social collectivities premised on material inequality. A class is an economically differentiated collectivity whose members share a common relation to the means of production or some similar material commonality and can be distinguished from members of others classes by inequalities, such as differences of occupation or income. This is not possible for an ethnic collectivity, though in some cases it may consist of members who share a common relation to the means of production. However, this identification is never cent per cent.

Sometimes ethnic groups are identified with *interest groups* as done by Glazer and Moynihan.¹⁹ However, the difference between dormant ethnic category and mobilized ethnic groups point to the fact that interest is one of many properties of a mobilized ethnic group;²⁰ but as Phadnis mentions the existence of other properties such as association with a specified territory; common beliefs and values showing its distinctiveness from other groups and recognition as different by other groups, is also necessary for designating a group as ethnic. But this makes an ethnic group very similar to a nation, for like nations, ethnic groups are communities in themselves with interest in preserving the external and internal conditions that sustain them, for example, freedom and autonomy. However the two can be clearly distinguished in terms of sovereignty.

Nations are communities that possess have a desire to possess, or remember that they once possessed and wish to repossess political sovereignty. However, the defining interest of ethnic groups excludes the interest in possessing political independence or sovereignty. But they may include two other collective interests: an interest in freedom of association so that they can carry on their cultural life as they wish without external interference and an interest in exercising public authority in a state such as provincial autonomy or special constitutional rights.

When an ethnic group aims at the possession of public authority, that is, the second interest as its main goal, it is termed as *ethnonation*.²¹

Here a reference to the term ethnic collectivity²² should be made, which is a generic term encompassing more specific terms that denote collectivities, including 'ethnic category', ethnic group and ethno nation.

The term *ethnic conflict* should also be explained at this stage. It covers a wide range of situations. In fact, some might argue that ethnic conflict as such actually does not exist. What actually exists is social, political and economic conflict between groups of people who identify each other in ethnic terms: colour, language etc. Very often such ethnic characteristics may make other distinguishing features, such as class interests and political power, which on analysis may turn out to be the more important elements in the conflict. Still, when ethnic differences are used consciously or unconsciously to distinguish the opposing actors in a conflict situation, particularly when they become powerful mobilizing symbols, then ethnicity does become

a determining factor in the nature and dynamic of the conflict.²³

Ethnic conflict can be expressed in many forms, ranging from individual behavior involving avoidance, exclusion and hostility accompanied by stereotyping, prejudice, intolerance and discrimination at the level of inter-personal relationship, through institutional political action; secessionist movements; to violent confrontations which may take the form of riots, massacres, genocide, uprisings, rebellion, revolution, terrorism, civil war, wars of national liberation and inter-state warfare.²⁴

*Rodolfo Stavenhagen identifies seven different situations, which result in ethnic conflicts. They are:*²⁵

1. Ethnic groups within a state which identifies itself as being multi-ethnic or multi-national. Such groups may base their identity, on language (as in Belgium and Switzerland), religion (as do Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus in India), nationality (as in the Soviet Union) or race (South Africa). In such cases, ethnic groups which are different from the dominant or majority nationality may or may not enjoy special legal status, and they are usually in a minority or non-dominant position.
2. Ethnic groups within a state which does not formally recognize its own multi-ethnic composition, such as France, Japan, Indonesia, Turkey, Portugal and numerous African countries. Here minorities may be regionally based such as Bretons and Corsicans in France, or Scots and Welsh in Britain, or they may be racial (as Blacks in the United States) religious (as the Copts in Egypt or the Bahai in Iran), linguistic (as the Berbers in Algeria), or tribal (as in Afghanistan), or a combination of several of these elements.
3. National minorities which identify with their ethnic kin in a neighbouring state in which they may have majority status (such as the Hungarians in Rumania, the Truks in Bulgaria, the Albanians in Yugoslavia, the Chicanos in the United States).
4. Multiple ethnic groups within a state in which none enjoys a particularly dominant position, specifically in recently independent formerly colonial countries, in which the state itself is a relatively weak artificial construct, as is the situation in Africa, south of Sahara.

5. Ethnic minorities which straddle international boundaries and with minority status in each one of the countries, as in the frontier areas in Southeast Asia, the Basques in Spain and France, and the Kurds in the Middle East.
6. Ethnic immigrants and refugees resulting from extensive migrations, particularly from the Third World countries into other Third World countries or into industrialized nations. Whereas in earlier centuries European settlers colonized numerous areas around the world, and their descendents constitute ethnic groups in many countries (sometimes as minorities, or else as majorities), in recent decades migratory flows have turned around and Third World immigrants are now settling their former metropolises, constituting ethnic enclaves in numerous countries and giving rise to serious social and cultural problems.
7. Indigenous and tribal people constitute a special case of ethnic groups, generally being regarded as minorities because of the historical circumstances of their conquest and the incorporation into new state structures as well as their attachment to their land and territory and their secular resistance to genocide, ethnocide and assimilation. In this category, Stavenhagen gives the example of indigenous people of Americas, Australia, New Zealand and numerous south and Southeast Asian tribal peoples.

Approaches / Perspectives towards Ethnic Phenomena:

1. **Primordialist:** It holds the view that ethnic identities are not 'chosen,' they are 'given.' It states that every person carries with him throughout his life attachments derived from place of birth, kinship relationships, religion, language and social practices that are natural to him. These provide an easy affinity with other people from the same background. In other words, it states that ethnic identities are based on common descent or a belief in common descent. Scholars by and large accept that not only in pre-modern or modernizing societies but even in modern industrial societies people develop attachments in their childhood and youth that have deep emotive significance and that remain with them throughout their lives, consciously or unconsciously. These often provide a basis for the formulation of social and political groupings in adult life.²⁶ In the words of George M. Scott Junior the primordial approach seeks a psychological explanation for the behavioural phenomenon of ethnic solidarity.²⁷ Researchers who have used the primordial approach include Novack, Gambino, Greeley, Issacs, Connor and Smith.²⁸ The critics however point out that cultural markers or attachments may vary in one's own life. For example, more than one language may be learnt in childhood; members of an ethnic group may shift from their own language to the other and educate their children in a different language; different religious identifications may be sought; and sometimes place of birth and kinship connections also loose their emotional significance for people and are viewed negatively. Critics further argue that the very recognition of the primordial sentiments and differentiated character of ethnic groups does not explain the cordiality or inter-ethnic group relationship at one period of time and not at another. Besides the view that ethnic attachments belong to the non-rational part of human personality ignores the possibility that an ethnic identity may be even felt or adopted for rational and affective reasons to preserve one's existence or to pursue some advantage.²⁹
2. **Instrumentalist:** The instrumentalists believe that ethnicity may be acquired or divested at will. It emphasizes the uses to which cultural symbols are put by elites seeking instrumental advantage for themselves or to the groups they claim to represent. Here ethnicity is seen as the pursuit of interest and advantage for members of groups whose cultures are infinitely malleable and manipulated by elites. In other words, here ethnicity is viewed as a communal organization that is manipulated by an interest group in its struggle to develop and maintain its power. The focused culture change is merely a part of the bargaining process. It can be understood best in terms of a market model by which ethnic group leader and members do not hesitate to abandon aspects of their culture or make change in their prejudices for the right price.³⁰ Thus ethnic group membership may depend more upon rituals of social acceptance and subjective identification than upon irreversible criteria of an inscriptive and involuntary nature. George M. Scott Jr. who calls this approach circumstantial says

that the circumstantial approach prefers a behavioural explanation.³¹ He writes that Cohen, Hechter, Nagata, Parkin, Patterson, Young, Fisher and Halsey have utilized this approach.³² However, there has been a strong critique of this approach also. The critics argue that here the role of elites is over-emphasized. Besides, they point out, even when ethnic identities are changed deliberately by a person for example by change of religion or language even then the change is not absolute. Some old attachments still persist.

3. *Eclectic*: This approach tries to combine the above mentioned two approaches. Its exponents claim that the fact that new cultural groups can be created for economic and political purposes does not make primordial perspective irrelevant. To them both the primordial and instrumental approaches have relevance. They criticize the tendency of proponents of primordial and instrumental approach to argue that the other is restricted as to the range of ethnic behavior it can explain. George M. Scott Jr says that according to the circumstantialists, while primordialists can explain the persistence of ethnicity over time, it fails to address explain why such identities can, and indeed often does, change. The primordialists, for their part, counter that while the circumstantialists can explain why ethnicity fluctuates over time, they are less able to account for the fact that despite its temporal fluctuations, ethnicity often persists, sometimes over centuries.³³ The Eclectists say that these two approaches have been treated as if they were mutually exclusive, that is, if ethnic attachments are primordial, they cannot be circumstantial; if they are circumstantial, they cannot be primordial. This in the eyes of the Eclectists is not correct. Hence some attempts were made to combine the primordial and the circumstantial approaches, recognizing the fact that while they are each necessary to explain why ethnic solidarity exists, neither of them alone is sufficient. Those who tried to do this include McKay, George M Scott Jr. and Brass. McKay proposed a 'matrix model' after a thorough review of the literature on 'ethnic phenomena'. His matrix model includes both the approaches. He wrote that they are interested ethnic manifestations which combine in varying degrees depending on the situation.³⁴ Another scholar Geogre M.

Scott Jr. wrote that primordial sentiments have to be tied to the circumstances under which they are aroused or maintained. To him the circumstances in which this most often occurs is when the members of an ethnic group face opposition from another group on the basis of their ethnic, or ethno religious, distinctiveness. To him human emotions primordial or otherwise do not occur without prior cause.³⁵

In view of Brass the two approaches can be reconciled by simply recognizing the fact that cultural groups differ in strength and richness of their cultural traditions and also in the strength of traditional institutions and social structure. In other words, the groups can be mobilized on the basis of specific appeals and not others and if the pre-existing communal and educational institutions of the groups are made available for the purpose, they may provide an effective means of political mobilization that is, they may provide traditional avenues for the mobilization and organization of the groups in new direction.³⁶

4. *Cultural Pluralist*: The main protagonists of this approach are Furnivall and M.G. Smith. It states that within a plural society, more than one ethnic group exists and this plurality leads to subordination of one group by the other. This approach was initially evolved by Furnivall whose plural society has following characteristic features, cultural divergence, the limitation of cross-cultural contacts to economic relations, a lack of shared values and the absence of common will, among groups, consisting that society. Such a society is inherently precarious and unstable and is held together by the exercise of force. Smith's cultural pluralism encompasses within a single society the co-existence of various groups possessing mutually incompatible institutional systems, that is, these groups are different in their social structures, value systems and belief patterns and also systems of action, from each other. Thus in a plural society there is a formal diversity in the core system of compulsory institutions. This cultural divergence leads to the subordination of one group by the other, which in turn, leads to ethnic conflict. In other words, a plural society is characterized by the existence of a dominant group as well as by the absence of consensus. Thus Smith's plural society tends towards the ethnic hierarchy or what Horowitz calls the ranked system.³⁷ However,

critics are not satisfied with this approach either. They point out that the notion of culture is an undifferentiated one. Moreover, Horowitz argues that value dissensus will lead to conflict only if one group infringes the precarious norms of another. However, value dissensus, may equally impede conflict by focusing the ambitions of various groups on alternative sources of gratification. Further, the dominant-subordinate syndrome does not take note of the intra-group cleavages. Besides, why so much ethnic conflict unfolds among that strata of the various ethnic groups which are culturally and socially most similar, that is, the westernized strata. It also ignores the specific contributions that elites make to ethnic conflict. And finally, it does not inform as to why in such a society impregnated with conflict, often inter-ethnic group harmony exists.

5. **Modernizationist:** Deutsch and Gellner are two important names associated with this approach. This approach implies that ethnic conflict is an integral part or even a product of the process of modernization. Karl W. Deutsch has first formulated the idea that social mobilization is an overall process of change which happens to substantial parts of the population in countries which are moving from traditional to modern way of life.³⁸ It involves the substitution of new pattern of behavior for old and it includes involvement in mass politics. The components of this process are efficient means of communication and transportation, adoption of a lingua franca, new agricultural technologies, urbanization, industrialization, mass-education, political mobilization and nation-building. These processes along with division of labour and extension of capitalist market would sever ties with local communities and the tribal affiliations would give way to new attachments. However, Deutsch recognizes that the process of social mobilization and assimilation might not proceed at the same speed, and this may result in conflict. Thus he suggests that ethnic conflict is the product of something analogous to a race between rates of social mobilization and rates of assimilation. However, he considers that in long run, the spread of communication will have a unifying effect.³⁹ Thus, this approach regards ethnicity as associated with the pre modern stage of development and holds the view that such affinities leading to

ethno national problems would melt away with the completion of the modernization processes. In other words, it perceives ethnic affinities as residual phenomena which are bound to disappear with modernization and development. However, critics have questioned this approach on many points. To begin with, they argue that it fails to explain ethnic conflict in modern societies of Europe and North America. Secondly, it ignores the role of mass media in strengthening ethnic identities at the expense of national awareness. Thirdly, the recent ethnic conflicts in Slav countries and Russia clearly indicate that ethnicity does not disappear with the flowering of modernization.

6. **Marxist:** This approach is a dialectical one which assumes that cultural phenomena are determined by the material or economic substructure. And economic substructure responds to the struggle of opposing classes in a series of developmental stages. Lenin asserted that it is due to the capitalist expansion that linguistically unified and politically united territories develop a desire for forming nation states. This approach regards ethnic conflicts as a passing phase of capitalist society essentially irrelevant to the class-struggle. It is regarded as a reactionary impulse to the development of class solidarity. It is treated as a false consciousness which is manipulated by political leadership and vested interests. However, it is certain to be engulfed by class warfare and proletariat internationalism when the later develops.⁴⁰ The major difficulty with this approach is that it gives greater importance to economic factors, though historical evidence suggests that ethnic factors may have a greater influence than class on the development of political and social systems. And they cannot be dismissed as mere manifestations of a false consciousness. Besides, this approaches claim that ethnic conflicts are a passing phase of capitalist society is also not true. History clearly proves that ethnic conflicts existed in the pre-capitalist societies and they still exist in the post-communist societies.
7. **Internal Colonialist:** This approach is closely related to that of Marxist and is also known as Neo-Marxist or Core-Periphery approach. Its chief proponents were Narin, Hechter, A.G. Frank and Stavenhagen. It has been borrowed from Marxist analysis of the concept

of imperialism and then applied to the uneven economic development of intra-state regions. The exponents of this approach claim that the process of economic development is not a smooth one. It generates disruptions and creates discrepancies between advanced and retarded groups. When these discrepancies are institutionalized into stratifications due to the tendency of core sector to exploit the material and human resources of the periphery for the benefit of more powerful elite at the center, it gives rise to internal colonialism. Peripheral and semi-peripheral areas become progressively more dependent on the core, which accumulates capital by using the resources of the colonized territory and maintaining its population as a reserve army of labour.⁴¹ The overriding concern of the elite is to maintain the instrumental dependency of the periphery and to deny the later any opportunity to challenge this stratification. Consequently the cultural markers are transformed from primordial attributes to politicized discriminators, and when members of the periphery seek to use the cultural markers as levers to end or delegitimize prevailing arrangements, which for them are not natural but the deliberate policy decisions of the dominants, ethnic conflict results. The combination of economy and culture in the analysis of internal colonialism is a forward thrust in an understanding of politicized ethnicity. But it implies that the internal colony must have a geographically defined area.⁴² However, this approach is not without limitations. It does not explain rise of ethnicity in relatively advanced groups and regions for example Punjab. Moreover the question of defining the boundaries between core, periphery and semi-periphery remains.

CONCLUSION

The above discussion indicates that the ethnic phenomena is very complex and does not lend itself to simplistic explanations. There is no one single approach which can be applied to all circumstances. As Glazer and Moynihan point out, it is because each case is unique in its own way. Each arises in a distinctive historical and social setting, and as such must be treated as unique in the sense that everything in human affairs is unique.⁴³

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