UNIT 24   ETHNICITY

Structure

24.0   OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should. be able to:

- understand what the term ethnicity means;

- explain various perspectives on ethnicity;

- analyse the major reasons for the emergence of an ethnic movement; and

- relate it to various factors which come into play.

24.1   INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, you read about the problems of minorities. In this unit, we will get to know about ethnicity, a phenomenon which has become a thorny issue. This unit will start with the definition of ethnicity and outline some of the perspectives on ethnicity. We will also be explaining the importance of identity for a group which provides an ethnic movement the impetus and a motive. Towards the end of the unit we will explain to you how ethnicity is greatly shaped by disparities and deprivations; a modern problem of development initiatives.

24.2 ETHNICITY: THE PROBLEM, DEFINITION AND IDENTITY

You must have heard the word ethnicity or ethnic problems. The word ethnicity comes from the root word ethnic which loosely means race. An ethnic community does not strictly have a racial connotation. A community can be distinct from others in many ways: their racial stock or origin being one of them. A community may distinguish itself from others by way of a particular or distinctive culture, language, religion or a combination of all these. Because of this distinctive aspect the ethnic communities often come in conflict with other communities with whom they come in contact.

In this section we will understand this problem of ethnicity by first understanding what ethnicity means and the nature of identity of ethnic communities.

24.2.1 The Problem of Ethnicity

Ethnic activity and separation came in a big way in the post colonial, newly emerging nations like Malaysia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nigeria etc. This was easly and crudely explained away as tribalism, backwardness etc. But ethnic activity affected even the developed West; the problem of Welsh and the Scots, Wallon-Flemish conflict in Belgium, the Basques in Spain, to name only a few. Even the seemingly egalitarian conflict-free melting pot America has been shattered by black ethnic activity. The erstwhile Socialist block, now, and for a long time, has been cauldron of ethnic crisis, with Crotian, Serbians, Bosnians, Slovak, Czech etc. in a conflict. In fact, ethnicity has now become a worldwide phenomenon.

The problem of ethnicity and national building has been widely discussed over the past few decades. The phenomenon of ethnicity has become all intrinsic component of the socio-political realities of multi-ethnic or plural cultural societies, specially in a country like India.

In India, with its variety of pluralities, in terms of language, race, religion and so on ethnic conflict has become a part of the political scenario. In most countries, including ours, the processes of development and change have generated conditions for ethnic conflict, as the fruits of these development processes have come to be distributed unevenly. Also the nature and character of the 1ower structure and rule of the political leadership have their role to play.

24.2.2 Definition of Ethnicity

The definition of concept in any field of social science is usually difficult. And a term such as ethnicity is loaded with meanings, values and prejudices and therefore, is even more difficult to define.

Ethnicity pertains to the word ethnic which is a distinction of mankind based on race. Ethnicity has now lost the original connotation. "It is now employed in a broader sense to signify self-consciousness of a group of people united, or closely related, by shared experience such as language, religious belief, common heritage, etc. While race usually denotes the attributes of a group, ethnic identity typifies creative response of a group who consider themselves marginalised in

society" (Barun De and Sunanjan Das, 1992: 69). Barth and Benedict Anderson feel that boundary is an important criterion for self defintion by ethnic group, to separate themselves from 'others'.

Let us see how the identity of a group is defined *vis-a-vis* another Community and how this identity becomes psychologically and socially important for a member or members of the community.

24.2.3 Ethnic Identity : A Psycho-sociological Reality

William G. Sumner observed that people have their own group as the center of their lives, and rate all other groups with reference to their own. He called this tendency of individuals to cling to their clan ethnocentricism. It is a generalised prejudice.

Why do human beings slip so easily into ethnic prejudice? Human beings have a natural tendency to form generalisations, concepts and categories. Their categories are close to their first-hand experiences. They also categorise basing on hearsay, fantasy and emotions. This process of social categorisation leads to the formation of an "in-group" and "out-group". All groups develop a way of living with characteristic codes and beliefs. Therefore, the formation of ethnic attitude is functionally related to becoming a group member. According to the social categorisation theories given by H. Tajfel (1981) as well as J.C. Turner (1982), every social group attempts to achieve an identity in contradiction to the "out-group" Identity can be broadly characterise as the process by which an individual is bound to his/her social group and by which he/she realises his/her social self. In the context of the Indian political identity, such a formulation has several implications. The emotional fervour associated with linguistic issues can perhaps be viewed in the context of this definition of social identity structure of the different language groups in the country.

The normative character of ethnic prejudices involve far more than the fact that attitudes are shared by members of a majority or minority group. Each member is expected to hold such attitudes and various kinds of pressures are brought on those who fail to conform to it. A sense of identity is a very natural human tendency but when an ethnic identity is consolidated and used as a reference point for mobilisation to share in the power structure, the mobilisation becomes far more effective.

While ethnic attributes are categorisation for the purpose of classification which is a static formulation, ethnicity is a dynamic process, whereby a group of people or community regroups itself as an adaptive strategy in response to specific demands of the situations.

Various scholars have looked at this phenomenon in various ways. We will have a quick look at some of the approaches to the study of ethnicity in our next section.

Check Your Progress 1

1) What are the various basis on which a community considers itself as distinct and different from others?

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2)   Write in few lines what you understand by the concept of identity.

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24.3   ETHNICITY: THE VARIOUS PERSPECTIVES OF ANALYSIS

Ethnicity has given new forms and meanings with changing process such a imperialism and modernity. Consequently ethnicity has become an important field of study for social scientist. There are varieties of assumptions regarding ethnicity.

There are some scholars who see the ethnic problem in terms of assimilation and integration; wherein an ethnic group is absorbed into the mainstream group or a dominant ethnic group : an assimilation of this kind in effect is homogenisation to create a nation state. To diffuse tension and to protect the dominated group it is also suggested to co-opt the marginalised group.

There are social scientists who see ethnicity as a natural bond between people, immutable or primordial (Geertz 1963:109). Thus the formation of political identity is seen by them as stemming from this primordial loyalty.

There are still others who essentially see no difference between class interest and ethnic interest. They argue that ethnicity is another alternative avenue for mobility (Berge 1976). Loyalty which goes in the way of mobilisation.

In this section and sub-section which will follow, we have given few ideas on ethnicity by some scholars who have worked in this area. Though there are conflicting and differing opinions on ethnicity some common points can be gathered from these various understanding.

24.3.1   Perspectives on Ethnicity

The conception that ethnicity is culturally pre-determined with its primordial loyalties and sentiments is largely discounted among social scientists. By and large scholars agree that an ethnic group is essential a social group when it is mobilised for collective action in pursuit of the interest of the group.

Writing on the politics of ethnicity in India and Pakistan, Hamza Alavi feels that the boundaries of ethnic categories are not 'objectively' pre-given, for whenever there is change of interest or situation, realignment has occurred as is evident from experiences. A so called objective criterion like, religion can be abandoned in favour of another like region or language. Alavi further states that the ethnic community, therefore, is not simply a politically mobilised

condition of a pre-existing set of people, described as an ethnic category. The ethnic categorisation itself is dependent in some way in the very emergence of, the community. Experience shows that both ethnic category and ethnic community are simultaneously constituted in a single movement.

Writing about ethnicity and nation-building in Sri Lanka, Urmila Phadnis says that ethnic identity is a significant but not a sufficient requisite for evoking ethnicity. It is the mobilisation and manipulation of group identity and interest by the leadership that leads to ethnicity. Ethnicity is used as an ideology and also as a device to wrest greater concessions and shares in the power structure. Dipankar Gupta also argues that the manifestation of ethnicity in Indian politics is not so much an outcome of popular grass-root passions as it ts a creation of vested political interests. He applies the notion of 'conspiracy' to ethnic politics in India to draw attention to the deliberate and calculated manner in which such politics is fashioned. He justifies his approach by asking the question as to, why from a variety of ethnic identities that abound in one society only certain ethnic dyads are politically activated and that too very selectively at certain points of time?

K.S. Singh and Sandra Wallman (1988) feel that ethnicity is being increasingly used to denote people with a distinctive set of bio-cultural and bio-social characteristics. Ethnic differences is recognition of contrast between us and them. In their opinion. ethnicity is an excellent tool for identification of the aspirations of a community for delineating its boundary, and for preserving its identity. These are some perspectives or approaches to study ethnicity.

24.3.2 Some Characteristics of Ethnicity

Following are some of the characteristics of ethnicity.

1) Ethnicity relates to ascriptive identities like caste, language religion, region etc.

2) Inequality in terms of sharing power between two ethnic groups results into conflict. The ethnicity is socially mobilised and territorially confined. It has numerically sufficient population, and is a pool of symbols depicting distinctiveness. It has a reference group in relation to which/whom a sense of relative deprivation (real or imagined) is aggregated

3) Being left out of the developmental process or even being a victim of uneven development, ethnicity causes ethnic movements.

4) Ethnicity is manifested in Indian politics not merely due to grassroot discontent but is also a creation of vested political interest.

5) Ethnic groups that use ethnicity to make demands in the political arena for alteration in their status, in their economic well-being, etc. are engaged very often in a form of interest group politics.

Before we try to understand the role of ethnicity in Indian politics, it is important to stress that whatever the difference between ethnic groups, the focus of their interaction finally boils down to the centrality of politics of who gets what, when and how? As already stated the focus of interests of an ethnic group, is to get some benefits for itself. The group often uses ethnic criterion like religion, language or caste to mobilise itself to give identity to itself which separates it from other group or groups. Thus, delineation of boundary of an ethnic group

of community is an important aspect of ethnicity markers. But exactly which one will get projected at a specific point of time would usually depend on where or how the person draws the boundary. Since delineation of the nature of boundary rests on the conditions existing at a given moment, the whole exercise becomes a response to the specific conditions. This adds fluidity to the situation and makes the identity projection a dynamic phenomenon. The nature of identity shifts along with changing circumstances and calls for change in boundary or a change in identification. The seeming singularity of identity, by and large, conveys a notion only. In reality, plurality of identities appears much more widespread than it ordinarily appears to be.

24.3.3 Latent and Manifest Identities

With plurality of identities, it is important to appreciate that all the identities of individuals or groups cannot be noticeable at a time. In fact, among various identities only one becomes manifest or apparent at a given point of time and the rest of the identities remain subsurface or latent. It may be repeated here that exactly which type of identity becomes manifest at a specific hour would depend on the nature of the immediate boundary delineation. It is, thus, through the interplay of latent and manifest identities that ethnicity expresses itself in a dynamic process. In general, whether an individual would identify himself/herself as a Hindu Rajput or a Bihari would depend, by and large on the existing conditions and felt needs of a given moment. A person ordinarily exercises his/her in order to work out what response it would be most appropriate at the given situation and acts accordingly. Thus, he/she contributes to the overall dynamics of the process.

Activity

Do you feel a sense of identity with the community you belong? If so, write in few lines the reasons why you have this feeling of identity?

24.4 PLURALITIES AND LARGER IDENTITY

India as we know has cultural economic and social heterogeneity. The complex ethnic plurality of our nation is a known fact. The ethnic groups vary in sise, culture, consciousness of group identity etc. and very often clear boundaries can be demarcated between group. The system on the whole is highly segmented and heterogeneous.

In such a system what are the ways in which these groups have incorporated into a nation state?

In the sections to follow we will discuss this constant dynamics; the quest for a larger identity at one level and pursuance of ethnic identities at the other level.

24.4.1 Quest for a Larger Identity

There is a general notion that narrow loyalties are expression of retrogradation or prejudice. This originates from the concern for broader identity and lack of appreciation of the fact that plurality of identity is a reality. In fact, emergence of ethnicity all around primarily on cultural counts has put the boundary of any nation-state under severe stress. Implicitly assuming the political boundary as something very sacred, the quest for larger identity is usually emphasised.

No doubt, this serves some immediate political purpose,(s). But at the same time, this emphasis on a large identity like nation ignores the reality of plural identities and their possible interplay and thus reverts back to the nation where religion, language etc. become static categories of ethnic attributes. At this stage, will be beneficial to understand how nationality or a nation has originate India. This we hope will clear, some confusions regarding the conflicting relationship between ethnicity and nationality.

24.4.2 The Emergence of India as a Nation

Geographically, Indian Sub-continent has facilitated the existence of numerous groups belonging to various racial stocks, speaking different languages and having different patterns of culture. Centuries of living together has not removed these differences. At the same time, the different groups moved in a unison in the political, economic and social spheres. The different groups were united by a common historical destiny which created a psychological unity. Though diverse practices were allowed, Hinduism retained a pan-Indian quality. Language too played its role in uniting the diverse elements: Sanskrit in ancient India provided the bridge between various pluralities, while Urdu, English and Hindi sought to do the same in later times. Thus, there existed a pan-Indian culture as well as various diverse, regional, local and ethnic culture what we may call as great and little traditions respectively.

Politically and administratively, India came under one umbrella under the centralised rule of Ashoka's Kalinga empire. Later the strong centralised monarchy under the Moghals created a pan-Indian sentiment. At the same time, several political powers, small identities had emerged in India. These were like the kingdoms of Marathas in Maharashtra, Sikhs in the most of Punjab in the North-West and in Bengal in the East. These territorial identities were not always well defined.

By the time of the British took over the reign of India, the change was enormous. With the British came the printing press, new system of education, new means and modes of communication and transportation and ideas of secular state, fraternity and liberty. Years of discontent with the British rule and its policies resulted in the first indigenous revolt in 1857. "The failure of the movement of 1857 to drive British out of India led to rethinking amongst educated Indians about alternative ways and means of getting rid of foreign domination. They commented that new education, science and technology had to be accepted in order to forge a new Indian national identity. If Indians could strive as a single entity. The task wold be easily and quickly accomplished. Thus, in the second half of the 19th century, organisations with the prefix 'Indian' began to appear" (Gopal, 1992: 42). The growth of national feeling was facilitated by infrastructural facilities and conditions such as printing press, new means of communication and transportation, etc. as mentioned above. This growing consciousness was implicit in the growth of such pan-Indian organisation like British Indian Association and later the Indian National Congress in 1885. Indian nationalism reached a maturity and became the uppermost concern, though there were occasions when ethnicity and plural identities were in conflict with nationalism. The latter, very often, appeared as integral part of Indian nationalism. Although secular ideas of nationalism were on the rise the question of regional identities were not dead and buried, rather, they were just relegated to the background. Thus, we not only had pan-Indian organisations like Indian

National Congress, there were organisations at the regional level like the Justice Party with its undertones of ethnic chauvinism in the Madras Presidency. However, "Secular nationalism, in the face of foreign rule kept ethinic and caste identities under control. It did not subdue them, but made compromises" (Ibid).

Once the freedom was won all the subduced forces surfaced again in the independent democratic India. Political power came to be the key to economic prosperity and enhanced social status. Henceforth, conscious attempts have been made by vested interests to whip up ethnic identity and invariably all political parties have made compromises with ethnic demand. Thus, we can see that the articulation of ethnicity or ethnic movements has closely been related to the power structure, the democratic process and initiation of socio-economic development.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Write in few lines the opinions of K.S. Singh and Sandra Wallman on ethnicity.

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2) Who coined the word ethnicity?

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3) What are the principal arguments given by the tribals for their demand of a separate state of Jharkhand?

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24.5 DEPRIVATION, DISPARITY AND THE STATE'S RESPONSE

A careful observation will reveal that ethnic movements are generally the expressions of deprivation and disparities in sharing of privileges. The Jharkhand Movement, for example, was a movement essentially to fight the exploitation of tribes by non-tribes not only in terms of natural resources but in terms of subjugation of their culture.

24.5.1 Regional and Ethnic Identities

What can be gathered from the above is that state is essentially accommodative of some of the ethnic demands. This has diffused the ethnic tension and conflicts in the country. And in some sense this enhanced the mobility and bargaining power of the ethnic group.

The post-Independent India has seen a lot of changes. We have made some new strides in development activity. Amidst this, there have emerged new classes and groups which have asserted for their separate identity and have enabled them to claim a larger share in the fruits of development. They have also realised that in a federal political structure like ours, which has a strong central state. the best way of carving out more power is to capture power at the state level.

Soon after Independence the most powerful manifestation of ethnicity in India was the demand for creation of state or province on linguistic basis. The State Reorganisation Committee was formed in 1956 and boundaries of the states were redrawn on the linguistic basis. This forming of linguistic states was a manifestation of ethnic identity. This process reinforced the regional and linguistic identity and ethnicity. Thus, the demand for separate state on various accounts like ethnicity, language, etc. soon became a part of the political scenario. Various political parties were formed at the state level which were, by and large, identified with ethnic elements.

24.5.2 Jharkhand Movement as an Example

The tribal belt of Central India comprising the portion of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa has seen the rise of the Jharkhand Movement, which agitated for the formation of a separate state for tribals and which they succeed in achieving. The Jharkhand Movement is a good example of politics of ethnicity. The movement drew its sustenance mainly from the growing discontent among tribals on account of their land alienation, exploitation and political neglect of their problems at the national level.

The Jagirdari system in the 18th century turned tribals into more tenets. And they were exploited shamelessly by non-tribals. In the wake of this there were a series of tribal uprisings between 1789-1900 A.D.

The Christian Missionaries entered the area of the middle of the 19th century. They made available for the tribals the facilities of education and helped, increase employment opportunities and economic improvement for them. A few educated tribal Christians organised Chhota Nagpur Unnati Samaj (CNUS) in 1928 for the tribal upliftment.

The turning point came when a separate province of Orissa was carved out of Bihar in 1936. The Chhota Nagpur Unnati Samaj and its new incarnation was Adibasi Sabha in 1938, emerged as the dominant political party under the leadership of Jaipal Singh, a British educated tribal of the area and this party demanded, for the first time, a separate tribal province.

The principal arguments given for the demand of separate state were: the physical characteristic of the area is such as there is a large concentration of the tribals. Their mental make-up, language culture and values are totally different from those of non-tribals. Also, the tribals felt that the welfare and

developmental works both provided and carried out for them are pittances in comparison to the mineral wealth and forest resources exploited from the region. The tribals had a strong fear of losing their identity as they were in minority surrounded by the non-tribals.

The tribals were marginalised at all levels. This had generated tremendous frustration among them. This harsh reality had provided the ground for effective propaganda which had facilitated the growth of an internal solidarity and out-group antagonism. There was an antipathy among them towards the non-tribals or Dikus. Interestingly, the definition of Dikus has changed with changing context. Originally Dikus were Zamindars and their non-tribal employees. Later non-tribals of upper castes background were identified as such. At present, the people from North Bihar are branded as Dikus.

24.5.3 The Indian State's Response

The Indian constitution, has recognised the ethnic diversities and ensured that these diversities may not be obliterated. At the same time, the constitution has also felt that ethnicity should not stand in the way of political, social, economic and cultural progress of people in the country. Provisions such as universal adult franchise granted to the people irrespective of their caste, race, language etc. granted to the people secular participation in various social and economic activities. The state has also turned to be reformist and has intervened to promote the lot of weaker sections and minorities.

Let us have look at some of the government policies to have an idea of the nature of ethnic demands and the State's response. "The most important of such demands came from religion and linguistic groups the resultant fear of dismemberment of the nation, appears to have made such demands totally unacceptable to the government. Whereas, demand for linguistic reorganisation of the State have been considered despite initial reluctance. Further, a policy of accommodation is clearly visible on the official, language issue. Brass (1978) lists down four rules which regulate the attitude of government towards ethnic demands. They are: (1) All demands short of secession will be allowed full expression, but sessionist demand will be supressed, if necessary, by armed forces (2) Regional demands based on language and culture will be accommodated but those demands based on religious differences will not be accepted. (3) An ethnic demand will be accepted only when it achieves broad popular support in the region and (4) the views of other groups involved in the dispute is essential for problem solving" (Nair, K.S., 1985: 106).

24.6 LET US SUM UP

One often hears a great deal about ethnicity and ethnic movement without really knowing what these mean. In our unit on ethnicity we have attempted to bring across to you the meaning of ethnicity. We have also mentioned about various perspectives on ethnicity and we hope that you would realise that ethnicity can be looked from various angles. The problem of ethnicity cannot be seen only as an identity problem but a problem of deprivation and lop-sided development. By presenting the case of the Jharkhand movement, we have drawn attention to the underlying basic problem of deprivation and exploitation covered in any ethnic movement.

It can be said in the end that ethnic movements are basically movements demanding for a larger share of the fruits of development and for this they adopt various strategies of mobilisation. The ethnic identity having a strong emotive appeal mobilises people into strong cohesive groups which then go on to make their demands felt whether real or imaginary.

24.7 KEY WORDS

Boundary	:	A line that marks a limit in terms of identity. A boundary separates one group from the other by pointing to the distinctive aspects of each group.
Ethnocentricism	:	It is a word coined by W.G. Sumner and used in his book 'Folkways'. It is a technical term for the view of things in which one's own group is the centre of everything and all other groups are scaled and rated generally inferior to it.
In-group	:	A social group of people having the same interests and attitudes.
Out-group	:	A social group of people other than those of in-group and their interests and attitudes are also different from those of the former.
Latent	:	Concealed and not visible, lying undeveloped but capable of developing.
Manifest	:	That which is clearly seen.
Mobilisation	:	In this context, it would mean to mobilise people into active participation in an ethnic movement.
Primordial	:	Existing from the beginning. That is why it is said to, be very basic. For example, identity to one's group by way of language, ethnic stock etc. is primordial because it seems to have always existed.

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24.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1) An ethnic community may consider itself distinct and different from other on the basis of a shared culture, language, race, religion or combination of all these.

2) William G. Sumner observes that people have their own group as the centre of times and rate all other groups with reference to their own. Identity is this process where an individual is bound to his/her social group by which he/she realised his/her social self.

Cbeck Your Progress 2

1) K.S. Singh and Sandra Wallman feel that the word ethnicity is being used to denote people with distinctive set of bio-cultural and bio-social characteristics which draws a line between us and them. They are of the view that ethnicity is an excellent tool for identification of the aspirations of a community for delineating its boundaries and presenting its identity.

2) The term 'ethnicity' was first used by W.G. Sumner in his book *'Folkways' (1906)'.*

3) Some of the principal arguments given by the tribals for the demand of a separate state-of Jharkhand were that the tribals are different from non-tribal in terms of language, culture, values, physical and mental makeup. They feared that they will lose their identity of being minorities. They also argued that the welfare and developmental measures provided by the government are pittances as compared to the mineral wealth and forest resources extracted from the tribal dominated areas.

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