

Navigating Ethnicity in India: Conceptual Frameworks and Social Realities

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Abstract

The paper explores the complex concept of ethnicity, emphasizing its distinctiveness from community and cultural categories. It discusses Fredrik Barth's perspective that culture describes behaviours among different ethnic groups, which hold unique cultural patterns and identities. Ethnic groups are defined as biologically self-perpetuating populations that share fundamental cultural values and norms. The paper highlights the dynamic nature of culture within ethnic groups, which is shaped by history and ongoing social interactions. It also notes the role of voluntary organizations and ideologies in establishing and maintaining ethnic boundaries, underscoring the tension between formal and informal organizational structures. The conclusion stresses the importance of understanding the unique characteristics of ethnic groups and the implications of boundary creation in the study of ethnicity.

Key Words- Culture, Ethnic Groups, Identity, Symbols, Collectivity and Community

1. Introduction

According to Fredrik Barth, culture is nothing but a way of describing human behaviour. There are distinct groups of people with cultures that differ from one another. The difference in the cultures of different groups, their historical backgrounds and their networks with each other has been given much attention, but very little attention has been given to the constitution of ethnic groups and the nature of boundaries among different ethnic groups. Anthropologists have also avoided these issues by using an abstract concept of 'society' to analyze the smaller and more concrete groups or units (Barth, 1969).

People often confuse terms like community and cultural category with ethnic groups, which are very different in meaning. Thus, the concept of ethnicity is considered to be very ambiguous because it shows various realities, just like the diversity of religion, language, way of life and various cultural groups that operate as interest groups, etc. The problem of understanding ethnicity lies in its uncritical association with the term "culture".

The Dictionary of Race and Ethnic Relations (Cashmore, 1984) trace the word "ethnic" to "ethnos", which means "nation" or "people". Specifically, the term 'ethnic' means a group of people separated from other collectivities. Based on anthropological studies on comparatively distinct 'ethnos', two important characteristics of the term 'ethnos' have emerged:

- i) These collectivities have their own distinct cultural patterns.
- ii) These same collectivities give a sense of belonging to the members of same ethnic group (Jain, 1995).

For example, the Jats of Haryana have distinct cultural practices, including their dress, food, dialect, folk music, folk dance, traditions, and customs. Rajputs of Rajasthan have their own cultural pattern which is different from the Jats of Haryana. Though Haryana and Rajasthan are neighbouring states, Jats and Rajputs have distinct ethnic boundaries, making them different from each other. They seek to maintain these ethnic boundaries by adhering to their own practices. Therefore, a Jat person may not feel a sense of belonging among Rajputs or may be unable to relate to Rajputs' cultural practices, and vice versa, owing to differences in practices.

The features used in the anthropological study of ethnos continued to be used in the study of ethnic groups involved in ethnic struggles in modern times. Thus, greater emphasis continued to be placed on the situationally relevant 'conservation mechanism' of an ethnic group's survival than on the 'dynamic mechanism' of its emergence and the changes it faces over its lifetime. As a result, the ethnic group that emerged on the linguistic base was equated with the linguistic-cultural category; the religious base was equated with the religious category, and so on. This led to the confusion between "ethnic" and "cultural" and therefore anything cultural became ethnic, and anything ethnic became cultural (ibid: 138)

This confusion attracted attention from various scholars, as Gordon quoted:

"our point... is not that we wish to legitimize confusion (emerged by considering linguistic, regional, religious and other cultural groups as ethnic groups) by giving it a name, but that there is a common social-psychological core to the categories 'races', 'religion' and 'national origin'- the sense of peoplehood- and the term 'ethnic group' is a useful one for designation of this common element" (Parenthesis and emphasis added).

By using the term "ethnic", Gordon referred to the "sense of peoplehood" and not the racial, religious or nationalistic aspects of a group that these terms could evoke. Even Glazer and Moynihan shared the same view. But for them, the common element was the capacity of an ethnic group to provide the direction for group mobilization (Glazer and Moynihan, 1975:18).

Ethnicity is an attempt to assert one's identity (based on cultural symbols) which is different from others' identity. The term "culture" in an ethnic group remains dynamic in a way that the processes of creation and its recreation continue to take place in an ethnic group. However, certain cultural attributes are maintained or held static and are considered critical to the identity of an ethnic group. Thus, only those attributes are considered cultural that, around which an ethnic identity is generally built or maintained (Jain, 1995).

2. Role of Culture in formation of an Ethnic Group

The scholars mentioned above don't deny the importance of cultural elements in the formation of an ethnic group. They acknowledge that class differs from ethnicity. But according to them, 'Ethnic' is much more than 'Culture'. Culture is the transfer of skills, values, traditions, and other aspects from one generation to another. Culture is dynamic in nature. It changes from time to time, depending upon the circumstances. An individual's culture may change with exposure to a different environment or through one's creativity. Hence, ethnicity is an attempt to assert one's identity through cultural symbols.

Barth (1969), in his attempt to analyze the concept of ethnicity, focused on three interconnected characteristics. The first and primary characteristic was organizing interactions among people. The other two categories were attempted to be connected to the primary characteristic. The second characteristic was an attempt to explore the different processes involved in generating and maintaining the boundaries. The third characteristic was an attempt to observe the processes that shift the focus of investigation from the internal constitution and history of separate groups to ethnic boundaries and boundary maintenance.

3. Meaning of Ethnic Groups by Different Scholars and Texts:

In anthropological literature, an ethnic group is a population which is:

- i) Biologically self-perpetuating.
- ii) Shares fundamental cultural values, already realized in overt unity in cultural forms.
- iii) Makes a base for foundation and interaction.
- iv) Membership helps in identifying not only with own ethnic group but helps in comparing with other distinguishable ethnic groups of same order.

This definition doesn't lose its essence from its traditional proposition, which says that race is equivalent to culture and culture is equivalent to language, and thus society is a unit which discriminates or rejects others (Barth, 1969).

The symbolic formation that represents Ethnicity, i.e., slogans, theories, mythologies, stereotypes, and ceremonials, is socially constructed and internalised through continuous socialization. The 'objective symbolic form' creates the 'subjective form' of ethnicity and not vice versa. Sociologically, what people actually do provides observable, verifiable criteria for ethnicity (Cohen, 1974).

According to Cohen, our subjective life is notoriously chaotic, whimsical, vague, shifty and very largely unconscious. Most people prefer to be guided by others who could be their parents, teachers, experts or leaders or the culture they inherit, to find the meaning of their uncertain ideas or feelings. On questioning, different men may give different reasons for performing certain patterns of behaviour, and the same men may give different reasons for performing the same act at different times (ibid: 10).

The term ethnicity will be of little use if it is used to denote cultural differences between isolated societies, autonomous regions, or independent populations, such as India and China. Differences between Indians and Chinese within their respective countries will be treated as national rather than ethnic. But when Indian and Chinese interact or meet in a foreign land, then they will be called ethnic groups (ibid: 11).

4. Ethnicity as a Cultural Phenomenon

An Ethnic Group is not simply a set of individual members, and its culture is not the sum total of the strategies adopted by its members. Norms, beliefs, and values exert constraining power because they are the collective representations of a group and are supported by that group's pressure. An individual can influence customs by becoming an active member of the group and adopting its dominant symbols. But he cannot manipulate others without being ready to be manipulated by them. Hence, an ethnic group is not a sum total of individuals, but rather the culture adopted by a set of individuals (ibid.: 13).

Each culture has its own history. This history helps create a world of diverse people, each with its own culture. These sets of people are organized in a society, which can legitimately be isolated for a description as an island to them (Barth, 1969: 11). For example, people living in India have their own set of practices, culture, language, mythologies, biological characteristics and so on which is different from its neighbouring countries like Pakistan, China, Myanmar and Bhutan. However, within India, cultural diversity is evident. Different groups have distinct cultures, yet they share a common culture that gives them a sense of central importance and binds them together. The sharing of common culture is evident in the celebration of festivals, food, clothing, and language. In the Northern region of India, Makkar Sankranti is celebrated by farmers at the time of harvesting, while in the Southern region, Pongal is celebrated by farmers at the same time. The names of festivals celebrated across a nation may differ from each other, but the purpose of celebrating them is common and is celebrated differently.

Before the formation of India and Pakistan, Punjab was a big state. However, after the partition, many people migrated from India to Pakistan and vice versa. Hence, the similarity in the language spoken in Punjab in India and Pakistan is evident. Their cultures may have changed over time due to political, social, economic, and cultural factors. However, common cultural practices can be observed among them due to their shared history. The Punjabis of Pakistan and India will be called nationals in their own countries, but if they interact in a foreign land, then they will be called different ethnic groups.

Likewise, in Hindi, some words are borrowed from Urdu and Persian due to the historical connection between the Persian language and Muslim communities in India. For example, words such as *zaruri* (important), *nishaan* (sign), *chehra* (face) and *hamesha* (always), etc. are the Urdu words that are used in Hindi. Similarly, Persian words such as *saal* (year), *aasman* (sky), *sabzi* (vegetable), and *naraz* (displeased) are used in Hindi vocabulary. In this way, examples of language and festivals, among other ethnic symbols, have been used to discuss the shared culture of different ethnic groups and its central importance to them.

Role of Voluntary Organizations and Ideology

To make their identification strong and different from others, the ethnic group needs to project itself as a 'significant unit'. For this, they not only need the symbols for identification, but they also need to structure their social interaction to assert their difference. To do so, there are several socio-cultural mechanisms like, ideology, social rituals and social organizations like voluntary organizations which help in the projection of symbols for identification and codes of behavior to ensure the desirable behavior pattern of group members is different from others (Jain, 1995: 142). These voluntary organizations ensure that the boundaries of their respective ethnic groups are maintained. It also helps in creating a pattern of ideal behaviour among its members. For example, through holy books, a lecture by a spiritual leader on the way to live an ideal life, and so on. These voluntary organizations can be different from each other on the basis of their purpose. Like in Christianity, the voluntary organizations are established on the basis of their purpose, which are Bible societies, Humanitarian Aid, across the world. Apart from purpose-based organizations, there are other types of organizations, such as Christian media organizations, mission organizations, Christian political organizations, Christian relief organizations, schools and colleges, sports organizations, trade unions and labour organizations, youth organizations, and miscellaneous organizations. Hence, these organizations make sure to create and maintain a boundary for the Christian

people. Like Christianity, there are Islamic organizations in different parts of the world, but these organizations are not purpose-based organizations.

The boundary is created by a few members of a group who are powerful enough to influence the customs of the ethnic group. They are called “elite” or the “powerful” ones who try to seek legitimacy for the creation of boundaries through “ideology”. Ideology may be used to justify ethnic struggles of the non-privileged condition of an ethnic group by explaining in terms of its historical exploitation by other ethnic groups or by explaining its privileged position through racial or cultural superiority over others. In other words, ideology is used to organize a group in cultural terms for psychological, social and political benefits (ibid: 142). Like Chamars (non-privileged ethnic group) in Punjab are asserting their culture by rewriting their own history, which is different from the Hindutva history.

Ethnicity and Informal Organization

In the process of formation of ethnicity there remains a constant struggle for the organization of economic production, exchange and distribution through the division of labour and competition for greater shares of income among men. As a result, variety of “interest groups” emerge, whose members have some interest in common. A poor section in one ethnic group joins another poor section, and a wealthy section joins another wealthy section because of the similarity of interests of respective sections. Based on class differences, privileged and underprivileged groups form within an ethnic group. The culture of two classes varies; both the classes develop their own set of values, traditions, norms and customs. Over time, the old traditions persist, while new values accumulate on them. Thus, it is important to examine what changes have occurred, how they have occurred, and for what purposes they have occurred in ethnic groups. It can be done through a proper analysis of the structural-socio-cultural interdependence among ethnic groups (Cohen, 1974).

Organization of Interest Groups

To operate successfully, an interest group needs to develop some basic organizational functions: boundary or distinctiveness, communication, authority structure, decision-making procedure, ideology and socialization. Organization is a group which is not concerned with the collectivity of total personalities but with the patterns of behavior developed by a number of people participating in some kind of specific and segmental roles (ibid.).

The interest groups can be organized on formal lines. It means that their aims are clearly specified and their organizational functions are rationally planned on bureaucratic lines. According to Weber, this kind of organization or association is the most effective or efficient type of human organization and in the industrial society, most of the groups try to make use of it (ibid: 17).

The members of the interest groups who are unable to organize themselves try to make use of whatever cultural mechanisms they have to articulate the organization of their groups. By doing this, it becomes easy to manage a group through the formation of trust. These interest groups are formed to compete in the wider society for their share of national income (ibid.: 21).

According to Cohen, it becomes difficult to understand or appreciate the nature of ethnicity in both developed and underdeveloped countries unless the distinction between formal and informal articulation of interest group organization becomes clear (ibid.: 18).

The distinction between formal and informal articulation of interest group organization is a matter of degree. Some groups are initially formed along formal lines, but over time, they may develop informal mechanisms of organisation. The other groups may try to articulate part of their organization from beginning on formal lines and the other part on informal lines. Thus, every organization has two dimensions, i.e. formal and informal organizations or an organization may be completely formal or informal or maybe both (ibid: 18).

5. Conclusion

'Ethnic Groups' should not be confused with the term 'cultural categories'. The two terms are very different and have different meanings. It is important to understand the history and processes of boundary creation by different ethnic groups, who created it, and the politics behind it. After establishing boundaries, the questions of how and why the boundaries of each ethnic group are maintained remain unanswered, and these questions require attention to achieve a proper understanding of the term 'ethnicity'. Besides, it is significant to see if ethnicity is affected by the political and economic conditions of a nation.

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