RESEARCH ARTICLE

ETHNICITY AND VIOLENCE INDIA

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The 21st century with its waves of globalization and liberalization, is also witnessing growing tensions-political, social, economic and cultural, in several parts of the world. Ethnicity and nationalism, interethnic conflicts, and secessionist movements have been major forces shaping the modern world and the structure and stability of contemporary states. Today, this is evident from a wide variety of multiethnic situations around the world, particularly in South Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Russia. Most states, marked by high level of diversities and differences based on race, religion, culture are facing the growing threats of ethnicity. States try to resolve this crisis as per their own socio-economic and political setup. Therefore it becomes all the more important to understand the term ethnicity, and the reasons for growing ethnic violence and movements of self-assertion. This paper is an attempt to highlight on these growing concerns of ethnic identity and violence with special reference to India.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century with its waves of globalization and liberalization, is also witnessing growing tensions-political, social, economic and cultural, in several parts of the world. Ethnicity and nationalism, interethnic conflicts, and secessionist movements have been major forces shaping the modern world and the structure and stability of contemporary states. In the closing decades of the twentieth century such forces and movements have emerged with new intensity. Today, this is evident from a wide variety of multiethnic situations around the world, particularly in South Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Russia. Most states, marked by high level of diversities and differences based on race, religion, culture are facing the growing threats of ethnicity. States try to resolve this crisis as per their own socio-economic and political setup. Therefore it becomes all the more important to understand the term ethnicity, and the reasons for growing ethnic violence and movements of self-assertion.

Ethnicity: Meaning and Causes

The word 'ethnicity' comes from the Greek word 'ethos', meaning nation. This referred to people or nations not converted to Christianity.

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In modern political usage, it is defined as a 'collectivity of people of a distinct nature in terms of race, descent and culture' (Sharma, 2008, p.9). Thus an ethnic group is a social collectivity having certain shared historicity and common attributes such as race, tribe, language, religion, dress, diet etc (ibid). The term ethnic is thus used as a designation of social unity based upon common language or dialect, culture, customs folklore. Hence it refers to large groups of people sharing common traits and customs. In anthropological literature, the term "ethnic group" is generally used to designate a population which is biologically self-perpetuating, sharing fundamental cultural values, communication and interaction.

Sociologists refer to "ethnic group" means a relatively stable socio-cultural group performing several functions, bound together by a language, linked to a territory and derived actually or allegedly from a system of kinship. Some writers regard ethnic groups possessing "primordial affinities and attachments". According to Paul Brass, "any group of people dissimilar from other peoples in terms of objective cultural criteria and containing within its membership, either in principle or in practice, the elements of a complete division of labor and reproduction forms an ethnic group (Brass, 1991)". Other scholars like T.K. Oommen hold the view in term of alienation or migration. According to Oommen ethnic groups are people who share a common history, tradition, language and life-style, but are uprooted or unattached from their

Urmila Phadnis defines it as "a historically formed aggregate of people having a real or imaginary association with a specific territory, a shared cluser of beliefs and values connoting its distinctiveness in relation to similar groups and recognized by others" (Phadnis, 2001). The International Encyclopaedia of the Social Science describes an ethnic group as a distinct category of population in a large society whose culture is usually different from the society own. The members of such a group feel themselves, or think that they are bound together by common ties of race or nationality or culture. Today, ethnicity has become an important tool not only for the mobilization but also in the struggle for preserving one"s political authority, territory, natural and material resources.

Changing Perspectives

The over whelming number of multiethnic and multicultural states of the world have brought into focus the continuous significance of ethnicity in politics and the developmental processes of these states. Most of theories of development have looked at claims of ethnicity as sources of tensions, impediments to the developmental process and threats to nation-building (Huntington, 1971; Wilbert, 1984). These claims are expressions of underdevelopment and that a theory of development should imply that emotional solidarities will be displaced by rational formations of collective interest (Das Gupta, 1988). Similarly radical as well as Marxist theories of development also pay little significance to ethnicity in the development process (Bottomore et al, 1983). However, ethnic movements and violence have played a decisive role in developing as well as developed countries. These upheavals have emerged with renewed vigor, particularly after World War II. The earlier stand that modernization along with its associated processes like urbanization, economic development, education and technological advancements would gradually bring down the role of religion, culture and ethnicity in politics. But this has not been so.

Ethnic violence and tensions have in fact grown with modernization and affected most societies of the modern world. Many societies which were regarded as citadels of integration and unity like the former Soviet Union, Czechoslavakia, Yugoslavia have totally disintegrated. Even the USA which gave the world the melting pot concept is also not devoid of ethnic conflicts. Western Europe, where such problems were thought to have been resolved, has faced renewed ethnic militancy as the case of Bretons and Corricons in France, Scots and Welsh in Britain, Flemish and Wallcons in Belgium, the Basque in Spain , Chechen uprising in Georgia and presently again in Spain where Cantonias want to secede from Spain, Even socialist countries with compelling and pervasive ideologies like the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe have not been devoid of the effects of ethnic violence. Even is facing this as is best seen in the case of Tibet.

Recent ethnic violence have also taken a heavy toll in West Asia and Africa, dominated by religious and ethnic minorities. West Asia continuous to burn with the ongoing Israeli-Palestine war where lives are lost every day. Africa, in recent history has faced some of the bloodiest ethnic wars. Some of the burning examples are Nigeria, ethnic animosity of two groups in Rawanda, expulsion of Asians from Uganda, Ghanaians from Nigeria. Other countries like Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zaire, Chad and Angola have also have had a spurt of ethnic-political conflicts.

Disastrous conflicts have also been witnessed in Latin America and near home in South Asia too. The cultural, religious, linguistic and ethnic diversity of South Asia have made this region a hot-bed of ethnic violence. Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and off course India continue to be the folds of ethnic violence. This shall be looked at later on. Thus ethnic violence world over are taking a heavy toll on human life and recourses. What are the reasons for this despite the winds of modernization blowing everywhere ? Various arguments have emerged. A close examination of these will perhaps help us in understanding ethnic demands.

REASONS FOR ETHNIC VIOLENCE

As mentioned earlier, "modernization was expected to scale down ethnic violence through progressive integration but on the contrary this has been the main factor behind marginalization of minority and ethnic communities, encouraging violence. Ethnic conflict are a persistent feature of modernity Several thinkers like Gramsci, Marcuse, Habermas have argued that in modern societies dominant elites through their "hegemony" of ideas have tried to control the lives of their citizens resulting in an excessive centralization of power and resources on one hand and growing expectations of people on the other has given rise to a feeling of alienation of individuals and groups. Others like Habermas have attributed the material growth of post industrial societies with the advance in science and technology and rationality and decline in values (religion) has resulted in ethnic conflicts. This is because ethnic communities have to overcome e an "identify crisis" as a result of growing rationalization and standardization due to science need to redefine their identify."

Another cause linked with modernization is resource competition. This can be both political as well as economical. This had led to a struggle for control over these resources by ethnic groups and the increase in ethnic conflicts. Thus modernization, industrialization and urbanization have led to unequal development resulting in regional inequalities. Areas not receiving the benefits of these processes when coincided with minority groups led to a revival of mobilizations of these groups to address their grievances thus creating ethno nationalism. This is the case in most of the ethnic conflicts in India, like Assam, Jammu Kashmir and Punjab.

Another perspective for ethnic violence can be explained by the concept of "relative deprivation" given by Ted Gurr in his study "Why Men Rebel". Relative deprivation is the key to collective violence in politics (Gurr, 1980). This is because there is a difference between what people perceive they are getting (value capacity) ad what they feel they are entitled to get (value expectations). This difference in perception gives rise to conflicts. Thus the lack of distributive justice, differential accessibility to resource and cultural differences have been considered the main reason for ethnic strives (Sharma, 2008). Another important reason attributed to ethnic violence is "cultural deprivation". This is associated with a feeling of insecurity of ethnic minorities to get lost in a sea of majority, where the majority may adopt discriminatory and oppressive policies towards the minorities. The tensions are further raised when the state identifies with the majority in the creation of a homogenous culture. It is against this cultural homogenization by the dominant groups which is seen as a threat to ethnic identities. As a result ethnic mobilization takes place to withstand ad oppose the pressures of the dominant groups. A democracy further provides the impetus to these

movements where ethnic groups mobilize themselves against the state. A distinction is made between "outsides" and "insiders" where outsiders are treated as foreigners and face the wrath of "insiders". Assam is a classic example of this type of ethnic strives. Thus ethnic groups are referred to as "primordial collectives" where members belonging to one state consider members of other states as outsiders (Sharma, 2008).

Ethnicity and Violence in India

A combination of the above factors is seen as the reasons for ethnic violence in India. India with a population of nearly 1.25 billion portrays a unique assimilation of ethnic groups displaying varied cultures and religious (2001 census). It's this religious, linguistic, regional and ethnic complexity that sets India apart from other nations (Muni, date unknown). During Independence several felt that India would be unable to function as a "cohesive unity" because of these diversities. Incredibly, as India became independent, the centripetal forces did not loose out, and there has been a gradual acknowledgement that India will remain a unity (Gupta, 1995). Nehru's colourful phrase "unity in diversity" became the key words. Thus evolved a composite culture India, which cannot be compared either with the melting pot of American society or with the multinational state as exemplified by the former Soviet Union (ibid, Muni).However, a land of such diversities cannot be free from conflicts between forces of unity and diversity. Accepting this Nehru said:

"While on one hand, we the people of India are bound together by strong bonds of culture, common objectives, friendship and affection, on the other hand , unfortunately, there was inherent in India, separatist and disruptive tendencies .....which made India suffer in the past. In preserving its unity , India needed to fight communalism , provincialism, separatism, statism and casteism".

The partition of India was regarded as a national tragedy and since then no other party has advocated partitions although India has experienced a spurt of ethnic tensions since independence. The first signs of mass mobilization was evident in the 1950s, when language based demands were made on the federal government. The creation of unilingual states and making Hindi as official language , were the two levels of linguistic conflicts. The anti-Hindi movement was spear headed by the the Dravida Kazhagam (Dravidian Organization) movement in Tamil Nadu in late 1940s and early 1950s when violent protest broke out against the adoption of Hindi as the national language by the government of India. The movement gave the call for the secession of Tamil Nadu from the Union of India on the basis of Tamil identity and language. Gradually this spread to other southern states taking a toll on life and property. The controversy between Hindi and non-Hindi movements reflected the deep concern of a broad coalition of ethnic groups based on the argument that a disproportionate developmental advantage should not be enjoyed by the five Hindi-speaking states by virtue of a monopoly status granted to Hindi as the official language by the federal government(DasGupta, 1988). This movement for the first time showed how different language identities could combine successfully for a common objective. Another mass mobilization also in the 1950s was for unilingual states. Although the Congress had agreed for the creation of linguists states in the 1920s, Nehru was apprehensive about their creation, fearing fragmentation of the nation. However,

due of intense linguistic feelings, the government conceded and many states were carved out based on languages by the State Reorganization Act of 1956. This led to the creation of Andhra Pradesh in 1953, Punjab and Gujarat in 1960, Punjab and Haryana in 966. Gradually linguistic reorganization was no longer regarded as a threat to national unity, rather an acceptance of India's plurality. However, in recent times, linguistic identity conflicts again surfaced in the state of Maharashtra, where in the name of Marathi pride, there were attacks on the helpless and poor Hindi-speaking North Indian immigrants from the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Several scholars have argued that language has been a post independent phenomena. Vanaik (1990) says linguistic ethnicity came into existence in India along with the growth of the national movement. He states that "linguistic community as a linguistic community did not so much precede the rise of nationalist consciousness and nationalist struggle as developd along with and through it" Vanaik contends that unlike religion, linguistic consciousness is never a powerful contender for separate nationhood because for most Indians, linguistic consciousness co-exists non-antagonistically with national consciousness (ibid). T.K. OOmen has furthered this idea (Oomen, 1990). While comparing language and religion, he argues that language has a greater legitimacy than religion for administrative restructuring. This is evident from the fact, that further provincial demarcations on finer linguistic took palce in the country without threatening the stability and unity of Indian nation-state. India should accept and acknowledge cultural pluralism and strive to build a multi-cultural society.

However unlike language, religious assertions in the country have emerged as a major threat to nation-building as both communities possess a mutual distrust since the nationalist movement which resurfaces time and again. Noted historian Bipin Chandra (Chandra1999) holds that communalism in India is a modern phenomenon. It took roots under British imperialism and emerged out the British policy of "divide and rule". This along with the creation of separate electorates on religious lines sowed the seeds of antagonism and distrust between different religious groups particularly, the Hindus and the Muslims. This distrust took a violent turn on 6th December, 1992, when a large group of Hindu (activists) demolished the 16th-century Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh. The demolition occurred after a political rally at the site turned violent. As per Hindu belief the city of Ayodhya is the birthplace of the Lord Rama. I n the 16th century Mughal general Mir Baqi, had built a mosque, known as the Babri Masjid, at a site considered by some Hindus to be *Ram Janamabhoomi.* the birthplace of Rama. In the 1980s, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) began a campaign for the construction of a temple dedicated to Rama at the site. Several rallies and marches were held as a part of this movement, including the the December 6th rally. The rally turned violent, and the crowd overwhelmed security forces and tore down the mosque. The demolition resulted in several months of intercommunal rioting between Hindu and Muslim communities, causing the death of at least 2,000 people. Another communal riots which shook the nation was the Godhra killings on 27th February, 2002, and thereafter communal riots across Gujarat, also known as the 2002 Gujarat violence. The violence was triggered by the burning of Sabamati Express on on 27th February which caused the deaths of 58 Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya. Following the initial incident there were further outbreaks of violence in Ahmedabad and other parts and further outbreaks

of communal riots against the minority Muslim population for the next year. According to official figures, the riots ended with 1,044 dead, 223 missing, and 2,500 injured. Of the dead, 790 were Muslim and 254 Hindu. Another communal riot which disturbed the tranquillity of the State of Odisha in recent times was the Kandhmal riots in 2008 between Hindu activists and Christians. The problem of Kandhamal is a deep rooted one which had its manifestations in 2008. Major issues in Kandhamal that have led to tensions are claims that "The Scheduled Caste and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act" is violated. Such claims include forcible occupation of tribal land, fake issuance of tribal certificates, illegal building of places of worship (mostly churches) on tribal land, religious conversions, and exploiting tribals for insurgent activities. This has also resulted in civil unrest and communal tensions earlier in 1986, 1994 and 2001. The August 2008 violence followed the killing of a VHP leader Swami Laxmananananda Saraswati along with four others; three fellow leaders of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and a boy on 23 August , allegedly by Christians fundamentalists. On 25–28 August, Hindu mobs angered by the multiple murders of Saraswati and others, set fire to many Christian settlements, and at least 45 people were killed. As per newspaper reports the violence damanged or destroyed an estimated 1,400 Christian homes and more than 80 places of worship. In addition, an estimated 18,500 Christians were forced to flee their villages to refugee camps "after their houses were attacked by rampaging mobs." These riots declared as a" shame" by former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, have left deep wounds which have not yet healed.

Another ethnic conflicts which have threatened national security have been the *ethno-national* conflicts acquiring a nativist colour. These conflicts have emerged with the transformation of ethnic groups into nationalities and their demand for autonomous governance or even secession as sovereign nation states. For e.g. the secessionist movement in Kashmir, the Khalistan movement by Sikhs in Punjab in 1970s and 1980s for a separate homeland, Assam crisisin the 80s and the Naga movement in North-East India. In case of Punjab, the conflict initially had a linguistic content in its early phase (mid-1960s). In the 70s and 80s it turned into a rivalry between competing sects, the Nirankaris and the Akalis. To this was added the tensions between Hindu Punjabis and Sikhs. Againt this setup their was an economic slowdown, growing unemployment and increased migration of the Sikhs, particularly the youth. The youth was a disillusioned one. They fell easy prey to the separatist movement in the 80s. There was a demand for secession and creation of an independent state of Khalistan. The Punjab crisis witnessed Operation Bluestar by Mrs. Gandhi, to flush out terrorists holed up in the Golden Temple, Amritsar, leading the assignation of Mrs. Gandhi in 1984, followed by a bloodbath where Silks were murdered and killed. These tensions were quietened in 1985 by the Rajiv-Longowal Accord. The elements of Punjab crisis is also reflected in the Kashmir conflict, where the initial movement was for the State's economic and political neglect which has now taken religious overtones. Islamic fundamentalists being trained in Pakistan have infiltrated the valley and spreading violence and the independence of Kashmir from India. Violence continues to range in the valley damaging life and property in the name of *azaadi*. The earlier concept of Kashmir identity as Kashmiriat, has been replaced by communal confrontation.

Further, the ethnic conflicts in Assam which has claimed a number of lives has endangered national security and unity. Like in other parts of the north-east, ethnic conflict in Assam is decades old, but has increased in frequency since the late 1970s. It was nativist in character and the initial thrust was directed to throw out 'foreigners' and targeted more generally against all non-Assamese people , gripped the state from 1979 to 1985 . The "sons of soil" concept demanded economic opportunities over those who migrated to the province from other parts of India. Another factors that gave the agitation ground support was the large-scale influx from Bangladesh, particularly after 1971. The Muslim population of Assam rose 77% between 1971 and 1991, whereas the Hindu population rose about 42% during the same period. This conflict took a violent turn under the leadership of the Bodos and the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). The violence has subsided with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985.

Tribal Identities and Growing Assertions

In the discussion above , most of the ethnic conflicts are based on linguistic, religious and nativist identities. However, another ethnic conflict is centred around tribal identities, where they have been the most neglected and marginalized. The exploitation and deprivations they faced under the British was continued in independent India.They had risen against the British when they were forcibly evicted from their traditional land for mineral and forest resources. This exploitative development and displacement from forests and traditional lands, threatening their livelihoods, has caused huge disaffection among them. This has led to a resurgence of tribal identities across India. Dispossession of land through *eminent domain* was a feature of colonial rule, followed by post colonial India and now a neo-liberal economy, since the economic reforms after 1991. The process had resulted in widespread dissent where tribal communities are fighting the forces of neo-liberal agents to safeguard their livelihood. This collective action is also termed as 'new social movements,(Cohen,1985; Melucci,1980;Touraine, 1981) where the tribes are engaged in armed rebellion against the state as a direct consequence of their oppression, displacement, poverty and anger against their cultural erosion under the hegemony of the dominant neo-liberal strategies. The recent case of the *Dongaria kondhas,* a particularly vulnerable tribal group *(PVTGs)* of Lanjigarh in Kalahandi district of Odisha*,* who resisted bauxite mining by Vedanta, a multinational corporation, from the Niyamgiri hills, their sacred home has been a landmark movement of tribal assertions. This was upheld by the 2012 Supreme Court decision, which has stopped all mining rights of Vedanta from the hills.

Conclusion

The above discussion has highlighted on various ethnic conflicts in a multiethnic and plural society like India. These have further the doubts of several minds, particularly Western scholars that have always had speculations as to how long Indian unity will hold (Gupta, 1990). Despite, the eruptions of violence, the Indian State has responded to the crisis, safeguarding the unity of the nation-state. Paul Brass (Brass, 1992) has highlighted on the the response of Indian state to ethnic tension in India. Indian state's response to ethnicity has been a mixed one. Overall, Paul Brass highlights the following responses of the Indian State: a) all demands short of secession have been allowed full expression, but secessionist demands have been out-rightly rejected; b) regional demands based on

language/culture have been accommodated, but those based on religious differences have not been accepted; c) an ethnic demand has only been accepted when there is a broad-based popular demand for it and d) views of other affected groups involved in the dispute have also been taken into consideration in arriving at any conclusion. Thus India despite its diversity has been successful in keeping the divisive forces within the boundaries thus maintaining its democracy while allowing voices of dissent. These voices of dissent can be minimized through a balanced, inclusive economic development, safeguarding the interests and identities of ethnic groups.

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