

## Engaging Ethnic Enclaves as an Ensemble for Nation Building\*

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**ABSTRACT** The strengths and weaknesses of the concept of ethnicity have been analyzed in the paper and a plea is made for careful and restricted use of the term on pragmatic grounds. Ethnic labels may be useful in some Western countries or in exceptional situations in plural societies, like rallying around a cluster of communities for 'schedulization' or for any other similar purposes in India. Otherwise ethnic group labels generally conceal more than they reveal, therefore a micro-vocabulary should be preferred by those who are working mostly at the micro and grassroots levels. Social scientists are urged to engage the emerging, so called, ethnic enclaves in the process of social cohesion and nation building.

We are witnessing an unprecedented rise in ethnicism in different parts of the world. Before entering the next century in the post-colonial and post-cold war era, it would be worthwhile to examine some of the issues involved in the current ethnic scenerio and to suggest some measures to integrate the emerging ethnic enclaves.

The "explosion of ethnics" (Toffler, 1990) is mainly because of the end of the two phases in contemporary history, viz. the colonialism and the cold war. One of the reasons for rise in ethnicity in most of the countries, freed from the colonial yoke, is the ever growing realization of the exploitation of their resources by the former colonial powers, making them poor. The failure of development measures announced or taken up by the new governments has aggravated the situation further in some parts. The cold war phase of history

acted as a deterrent to the emergence of so called ethnic problems.

The issues surrounding ethnicity, nation-state, inter-ethnic conflicts in the process of nation building are by no means new to scholars, but because of a "heating up" of violence all over the world, these issues need serious discussion (Tambiah, 1988). This paper examines the concept of ethnicity, illustrates the strength of the concept because of its flexibility, but pleads for its restricted use due to a number of reasons.

### *Concept of Ethnicity*

For this part, I have been mainly influenced by two papers: (i) "Race, Caste and Ethnic Identity" by Andre Beteille (1971) and (ii) "Negotiating Ethnicity - The Impact of Anthropological Theory & Practice" by Susan Keefe (1989).

Andre Beteille, concedes that "sometimes a strong sense of community can exist even in the absence of visible physical indication. This leads us to a consideration of ethnic groups and identities". Then based on ethnic group's definition from the International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences: "a distinct category of the population in a larger society whose culture is usually different from others; the members of such a group feel themselves, or are thought to be bound together by common ties of race or nationality or culture," Beteille concludes that "there is no single criterion by which ethnic groups can be defined". Although ethnic categories take cultural differences into account, we can not assume a simple one-to-one relationship between ethnic units and cultural similarities and differences (Barth, 1969). Therefore, we cannot say that ethnicity is part-race, part-culture and part-nationality, although we may say that "ethnicity is part-sentiment, part-agenda

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and part-ideology" (Dube, 1989).

In Keefe's view, ethnicity is a process, perception and an empirical phenomenon, whose understanding is a must for practicing anthropologists, working in applied settings, which are generally politically charged public arena. Regarding the emergence of the concept of ethnicity, she observes that when race, as a standardized category of analysis, was virtually disappearing from anthropological discourse, following criticism of its scientific basis, during 1940s and '50s; interest began to turn from race or tribe to the concept of ethnicity based on cultural definition of groups. Although physical attributes may have been incorporated into definition of ethnic groups, they never became focus of particular study.

Ethnicity is a term mainly originated to describe social situation in the United States, to describe immigrant groups arriving from different parts of the globe. Their costumes, cuisine, culinary and so on were also described with the adjective "ethnic" and these alien-concepts got currency in other countries as well. Countries like former Soviet Union, where terms such as caste and tribe were not liked, the term ethnic was preferred and retained to describe social variations.

Definitions of ethnicity have ranged from those that describe it as an effective social fact to those that view it as a conscious strategic choice (Mammon and Rathore, 1996). Dube (1989) calls ethnicity as a multi-stranded phenomenon and asks anthropology to analyze and explain this strange enigmatic phenomenon. The conceptual question of ethnicity has been aptly resolved by Das (1992) when he states that "from standing for conceptualizing a racially-defined group, measureable through anthropometric tools, ethnicity has progressed to a catchword to describe almost any type of social grouping. The progress from specificity to generality, even vagueness, has both watered down the concept and also given it immense power".

### *Flexibility of Ethnicity*

The popularity of the concept of ethnicity lies in its flexibility and utility, both for those who write about social situations and those

who are part of a social system. As Despres (1975) concludes, "ethnicity is above all an instrumental phenomenon. Ethnic identities and their symbolic counterments can be manipulated. They are, in a sense, political or economic power." (quoted from McQuire, 1986). Therefore, it may be said that if ethnic group identity yields no special advantage in competition over resources or claim over a particular beneficial status, the ethnic boundaries will weaken and ethnic identities will diminish. It has been seen that ethnic identity is flexible and situation variable and individuals manipulate it to serve socio-economic and political ends.

From this perspective, one can explain the emerging dalit, backward-class, tribal and minority identities, where different communities are rallying behind any of these identities to gain political mileage and to assert their rights. Ethnicity concept may be conveniently used to explain another type of movements going on under the process of "schedulization" (Kumar, 1989) in which "a community or part of a community changes or reaffirms its customs, rituals, ideology and way of life in the direction of a scheduled community to claim a berth in the schedule for listing Scheduled Tribes (ST), Scheduled Castes (SC) or Other Backward Classes (OBC). The term Schedulization has been coined in contrast to MN Srinivas's well-known concept "Sanskritisation".

The idea of schedulization emerged from an empirical study that I conducted in North and South Bihar to unravel the claim of certain groups schedulizing under the identity of Tanti, a caste-cluster recognized as OBC but seeking the SC status. It was found out that the movement for schedulization was actually started by Pans - a SC community of Singhbhum district, who adopted Tanti label in the beginning of this century but from around 1960 started a crusade to get their SC status back. In their campaign, Tantis, as well as Tatwe and Khatwe, from other districts of Bihar also joined the bandwagon to get the SC status. The common thread binding all the above referred communities rallying behind Tanti identity was the weaving, as their occupation, and the hope to get the SC status. If there is no hope to get the

SC status, some of the real Tantis might like to withdraw from the movement going on under the Tanti identity.

There is considerable variety in the types of movements going on under getting schedulization. For example, all communities under the Banjara ethnic group (being ST in Andhra, SC in Karnataka, Himachal and Delhi; OBC in some states and general category in other states) are now striving for the ST status. There are cases where a group is scheduled in one state but not in the neighbouring one or in other states where they have migrated. A large number of tribals from Bihar are working as tea garden labourers in Assam, without being recognised as STs. Raman (1995) has rightly remarked that scholars who claim to study social stratification and ethnicity, casually refer to this stark fact of lack of scheduling facility for these deprived tribals, whereas their agnates in Bihar are STs. However, Raman's (1995) assertion that the structures of extra-economic coercion are organized around ethnicity and generalization that "in India, class relations have rested not only on ethnic content of caste but also on other ethnic categories such as tribe, religious minorities, etc." is stretching the concept of ethnicity a bit too far. Explaining the process of alignments of different communities for Schedulization (Kumar, 1989) or struggle of a cluster of communities labeled as Mohajir in Pakistan (Shukla, 1995) under ethnic identity may be fine but it may not be appropriate to look for ethnicity in all caste, tribe and minority interactions.

For those who work at the grass-roots level, it would be better to use the exact name of the caste, tribe, minority or any other disadvantaged or advantaged group, instead of clubbing all such categories under the rubric of ethnicity. Recently, violent clashes in parts of Assam have been reported by media mainly as ethnic violence, and not as a clash between Bodos and Santhals. Therefore, it is apparent that liberal use of the term ethnic at times blurs the minute details of a micro situation. Therefore, those who work at micro-level, like anthropologists and related scientists, should use the micro-vocabulary for understanding the reality of the social situation and its solu-

tion and break the ethnic myths which at times create avoidable conflicts and cleavages in society.

Like the negation of the existence of indigenous people in India, on the grounds that we are living together for so many generations, the use of ethnic groups should be avoided on the grounds that we never had the history of missing or discrimination of the sort practised in USA. As there is a thinking going on when and how international organizations should intervene to resolve ethnic conflicts (Esman and Telhami, 1995), it would be prudent not to label identity caste, class or communities under the label of ethnic groups. Mohanty (1995) warned us to use the terms like "empowerment, civil society and democratization," with care, as these are part of political philosophy of the new economic globalization of western capitalism. Similarly the unbridled use of the label ethnicity could prove dangerous in its practical implications.

#### *Social Integration and Nation Building*

At the World Summit for Social Development, held at Copenhagen in March 1995, ten Commitments emerged which were signed by 117 countries, including India. As a part of the Commitment 4, to "promote social integration" by fostering stable, safe and just societies; we also commit, at national level, to "recognize and respect cultural, ethnic and religious diversity, promote and protect the right of persons belonging to national, ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities" (UN, 1995).

In India, diverse communities are living together from time immemorial and the historical depth of our civilization provides a sense of security to minorities and other special groups. Our Constitution recognizes "the people of India" as the unit for operation in civic life. All communities have been given equal status, it annuls untouchability and its consequent disabilities. It however provides protective discrimination for SCs and STs through ensuring their access to political office, employment in government jobs and educational institutions and many other opportunities related to their social and economic development.

For the development of Scheduled Castes

and Scheduled Tribes, Special Component Plan (SCP) and Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) respectively have been designed to channelize the flow of funds out of the State and Central Plans. A National Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes Finance and Development Corporation has been set up with the objective of accelerating economic growth and development of members of the SCs and STs and assisting them by providing necessary funds at concessional rates for starting projects in sectors like agriculture and allied activities, horticulture, animal husbandry and dairy development, minor irrigation, small industries, trades and services and transport, etc.

For the development of minorities and Other Backward Classes, two finance corporations, one for backward classes (National Backward Classes Finance and Development Corporation) and other for minorities (Minorities Development Corporation) have been set up with the objectives of promoting activities for economic development and providing financial assistance for setting up employment ventures.

For human rights and civic responsibilities, the Government of India in right earnest has addressed to the issue. An independent judicial system is in operation for redressal of violations of fundamental rights. In addition a National Human Rights Commission, headed by a former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India, is in operation as a quasi-judicial body. Other Commissions for specific groups vested with quasi-judicial powers also exist, viz. National Commission for Women, Minorities Commission, Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Commission for Backward Classes, etc.

As a result of these measures, improvements have been made and integrative principles of a new Indian society founded. The voluntary sector, which through its innovative programmes in the fields of credit, education, health, employment, etc. is now integrating the diverse ethnic strands and are helping in the process of social cohesion and nation building. The energization of "Panchayati Raj Institutions" (local self governments) would also act as a step in ensuing social integration.

Even with these positive aspects, we must

realize that the process of nation building has just begun and the caste, communal or ethnic clashes are part of this ongoing process. Mukherji (1990) clarified that the task of nation building has to be distinguished from state formation. He states further that while the so called Third World countries have emerged as newly independent states, they have yet to mature as nations. Maturity to a nation implies an emotional-affective attachment of an average citizen to one's own country transcending those based on his primordial attachments. The notion of the sense of patriotism is consistent with such a national consciousness. Our country, like many Third World countries, is a state in the context of the system, but the task of nation building has yet to be accomplished. Therefore *India* is a nation in the becoming, not yet a nation in the being.

A state which is a nation in the becoming is generally a vulnerable state. Both contradictions within the state and forces external to it contribute to this vulnerability. The internal contradictions are generally a continuity from pre-colonial to the post-colonial era. The task of nation-building is to set in motion a process by which the internal contradictions are resolved to the point where a consensus is firmly established on a set of national institutions embracing the entire polity, economy and society. Such a consensus, once reached, is less likely to be vulnerable to outside forces and the nation-state cannot easily be altered.

In short, the passage from the establishment of a state to that of a nation-state is likely to be a period of consensus-building. Singh (1995) after analyzing the earlier paradigms of social integration, suggests that "replacement of the local primordial paradigm of societal integration by the civic cosmopolitan paradigm takes time, and the transition may be less or more painful depending upon the historicity of circumstances in a particular society. India cannot but move towards this paradigm of societal integration in future years. It is this paradigm alone that would ultimately offer maximum space for the fullest development of the marginalized groups of today." Unlike the USA, where multi-ethnicity was galvanized into a nation by creating "a brand new national identity"

(Schlesinger, 1991), we have to gradually move towards a stronger nationhood, as per the civic cosmopolitan paradigm suggested above. We should help in the process by highlighting the common bonds among communities co-existing in multi-community situations. Understanding of ethnicity may be utilized in solving problems as has been demonstrated by Reeves-Ellington (1995) by improving the business results of a multi-national company having multi-ethnic employees. He created an ethnic organization, by applying cultural logic and social knowledge, as an alternative to the modern organization. On completing 50 years of independent nationhood, Indian social scientists are urged to engage the emerging ethnic enclaves in the process of nation building.

### Summing Up

Applying the term ethnicity to explain interaction of known caste/tribal or other communities should be avoided, as ethnic group label conceals more and reveal less. Being engaged mostly in micro-studies emanating from grass-roots level, such social scientists should prefer micro-vocabulary compared to the use of umbrella terms like ethnicity. Such terms may be preferred by macro-study scholars or theoreticians looking for meta-narratives in post-modernization phase. If we have to use terms like ethnicity, it should be for applied work, may be for binding people for any constructive work, nation building and societal integration.

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