Ethnicity and Conflict: A Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract

Ethnicity has been the most significant phenomenon of the modern world. Stratification and diversification with variegated dimensions and context is an inbound mechanism of a social fabric of a society and state. Different scholars, intellectuals and men of letters studied the phenomenon of ethnicity in different ways. Some intellectuals call it as a minority, insiders, outsiders, others and nationalities. Ethnicity can be defined as a group of individuals identified on the basis of race, colour, language and territory. These groups have been existing almost in every part of the world. In reality the states are plural societies with many national, sub-national, religious, professional, racial, linguistic and geographic identities. In some states these identities live side by side, while in others they conflict with each other and undermine political edifice of the society. Ethnic identities live peacefully without conflicting with each other until and unless they are triggered to do so. The apparent and pre-dominant cause of conflict among different ethnic identities is politico-economic imbalance and these identities, if in conflict have potential to destabilize or disintegrate the political system of any country. There is hard need to initiate various measures, though which will not eliminate the possibilities of ethnic conflicts, but definitely minimize them.

Key Words: Stratification, diversification, ethnic politics, explicit conflicts, prejudices, Participation

There is hardly any state in the world which is not ethnically plural. These pluralities live side by side without intermingling with each other. In developed states of the world ethnic identities play a constructive role towards the stability of political system but developing polities remain unable to place different ethnic groups politically, socially and economically at their appropriate place. Therefore, ethnic identities get an opportunity to resist against the policies of ruling authority. Weak political system remains unable to address actual grievances of deprived people. Resistance under these circumstances starts to escalate and pose a major threat to the integrity of

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state. It is very necessary for building up a stable political system to grant various ethnic identities the right to decide their own future (Gillov, 1983: 34). Equal opportunities should be before going into detail here it is deemed necessary to define the phenomenon of ethnicity. Ethnicity seems to be new term; however, the word "ethnic" is much older. The word ethnic is most probably derived from the Latin word "ethnicus" or from the Greek word "ethnikos" which means, national, foreign and genile (Eriksen, 1993: 3).

Ethnic in English began as an adjective, meaning pagan or heathen. In Social Sciences, the sense or connotation was racial or ethnological. In 1941, sociologists W.Lioyd Warner and Paul S.Lunt, in 'The Social Life of a Modern Community' employed the term for the first time as a noun, hence wrote:

"These groups…we have called "ethnic" (Eriksen, 1993: 3).

Anthropologists describe ethnic as:

"A group possessing some degree of coherence and solidarity composed of people who are, or at least latently, aware of having common origin and interests" (Cashmore, 1993: 97).

According to Cambridge Encyclopedia:

"It is a group of individuals identified on the basis of race, colour, language and territory" (Crystal, 1991: 421)

Furnivall explains the concept of ethnicity in a very simple and elaborate way:

"A group of individuals living side by side but not intermingling with each other" (Furnivall, 1984: 23-45).

According to Furnivall ethnic groups want to preserve their specific identity. Ethnicity itself is not harmful for the existence of any society. The intensity of different variables creates contradictory point of view and hostile environment within the territory of any state.

Centhia Enloe has given a very comprehensive definition:

"That people grouped together on the basis of territory, professions, languages, geography without conflicting with each other until and unless they are triggered to do so" (Enloe, 1975: 275).

There are different variables which have potential to give birth sense of oneness among individuals and such a group of individuals start to feel that they have common objectives and for achieving these objectives they have to

initiate common efforts. Ethnic identities positively contribute in the developmental process of state but only when they are given their due share in policy making process. Ethnic identities do not show any compromise regarding their specific identities.

However the Encyclopedia Britannica describes ethnic group in a much more elaborate way:

"A social group or category of the population that, in a larger society, is set apart and bound together by common ties of race, language, nationality and culture. As a general case, at the core of ethnic identification are what have been termed as primordial affinities and attachments derived from the place of birth, kinship relationship, religion. Language and social practices that come natural to an individual to attach himself to other individuals from the same background. These attachments remain in the unconscious and can be rekindled by appropriate stimuli" (Ahmad, 1984: 268)

Intellectuals make a differentiation between ethnic groups and nations on the basis of various dimensions such as, ethnic groups are usually smaller; they are clearly based on a common ancestry; and ethnic groups are considered more pervasive in human history, while on the other hand nations are more specific to time and space. Ethnic groups share certain inborn attributes. Ethnic group is a quasi national type of minority group within the state, which has somehow not achieved the status of a nation (Lellas, 1998: 5). Ethnic politics in Britain is considered the politics of recent non-white immigrants and English are perceived in England to be neither ethnic nor nationalists rather patriotic. There is difference in the character of ethnic politics, compared nationalist politics. Nationalism mainly focuses on national self-determination while main objective of ethnic politics to protect the rights of specific ethnic groups within the existing state and they do not claim for a territorial homeland. They start to pose a serious threat to the integrity of state only when their actual grievances are not addressed by the authorities and they find a threat to survive as specific identity.

There are various approaches with the help of which the phenomenon of ethnicity is explained. Primordial theory entertains ethnicity as a predominantly biological phenomenon having its roots in culture and history (Barnard and Sepencer, 1996:190)**.** This theory is based upon evolutionism and ethnicity is treated by genetic and geographical factors. The instrumental approach about athnicty which is urbanized in the mid-1970, until when the linguistic, religious and racial characteristics were treated as primordial givens on basis of ethnicity. Instrumentalist inspiration has its origin in utilitarian philosophy and instrumentalist talked about ethnicity as, "A product of political myths created and manipulated by cultural elite in their pursuit of advantages and power (Barnard and Sepencer, 1996:190). According to instrumentalists sometimes

ethnicity becomes fundamental ingredient of a psychosomatic game of actions, when it is used to recapture the vanished ethnicity as product of political myths and this is manipulated by cultural elite for preserving their interests.

Constructivist approach is another way of understanding ethnicity, it focuses on the situational and contextual character of ethnicity, to see more clearly its political dimension, such as ability to structure inter-group relations and to serve as a basis for the political mobilization and stratification. Ethnicity according to this approach can be defined as, "A continuing ascription which classifies a person in terms of their most general and inclusive identity, presumptively determined by origin and background as well as form of social organization maintained by inter-group boundary mechanism, based on manipulation of identities and their situational character (Barnard and Sepencer, 1996:190)

According to Marxist point of view ethnicity first emerged as a historical concept in the context of mutual relations between oppressed and oppressor nations (Stalin, 1977: 8). It is stated by the Marxists that Bourgeoisie conspitorially created ethnic blocs out of Proletariat with the objective of undermining the revolutionary process (Stalin, 1977: 8). Lenin emphasized their exceptional stability, pointing out that national peculiarities were bound to persist, even in the new classless society (Gillov, 1983: 34). But a strong power center and the revolutionary party of working class, equipped with the knowledge of the laws of social development and guided by the principles of scientific socialism (ideological indoctrination) keep them subdued and at proper time and at the peak of revolutionary moments, these groups will fade in the dictatorship of proletariat (Gillov, 1983: 36). But this momentum could not be kept at the peak by the later rulers. Center started to show weaknesses and ideological indoctrination was shrouded in oblivision, policies such as Perestroika and Glasnost ignited the dormant hatred, unacceptability and alienation, the suppressed forces were unleashed and nationalities demanded for independence. The dismemberment of Soviet Union is accredited to ethnicity, particularly with reference to the independence of the Baltic States and the Central Asian Republics (CARs). The conflict of ethnicity further re-established that ethnic politics had been at work in Soviet Union throughout.

Capitalists perceive ethnicity is a feeling of oneness on the basis of caste, creed, colour, language, nationality, profession and territory. They consider ethnic identities as a natural output of social interaction. They perceive ethnicity as a part of social fabric of any state and grouping within a society is natural. Different ethnic groups live side by side but do not intermingle with each other. Whenever ethnic groups are deprived, suppressed or treated unjustly, they come into conflict and many a times erode a political system. Capitalists believe that if ethnic identities are inducted in the main stream and

system respond to their demands, the ethnic groups perform their functions towards the stability of political system of any state (Enloe, 1975: 265).

They assert that ethnicity depends on self-identification. They conflict when their form is messed up and identification becomes a misnomer. It is necessary to create an integrated community that equal opportunities should be given to various ethnic identities to participate in decision making process. By doing this the chances of emerging conflicts among ethnic identities can be minimized and functioning of political system can be made smooth. Capitalists believe that in the functioning of the political system of the plural societies if balance development and modernity take place, the chances are there that ethnic identities fade into a national culture. American scholars therefore, called America the melting pot (Glazer and Moynihan, 1963: 3). This hypothesis of melting pot remained popular for a longer span of time in western societies but even in this popular period in countries like USA and Britain crime rate among races was on its peak. Adverse race relations, which had been a common feature, were more deeply entrenched in the social soil of society. Treatment of blacks and activities of Klu Klux Kalan had provided enough support to the hypothesis of others (Collier and Horowitz, 1991: 129).

Ethnic conflicts are crucial not only in developing polities but also in developed polities. For minimizing these conflicts different scholars presented various models, Arned Lijphart is one among them. He presented consociational model. According to writer bitter consequences of ethnic conflicts in deeply divided societies may be avoided through political engineering of new states based on consociational model (Bras, 1991: 333). There are different characteristics of consociational model such as, government by a greater coalition, an equal share should be given to all segments of society in decision making process, higher degree of autonomy to each segment to run its own internal affairs. Lijphart stated that consociational model is both an empirical model that explains the political stability of several smaller European states, namely Austria, Belgium and Nether Land; it is also a normative model for the plural societies of the third world (Bras, 1991: 336).

Michael Banton discusses that problems of change can only be overcome through the process of assimilation. He argues that assimilation might best be seen as the reduction of cultural distance between specified groups with respect to some particular aspects of their behaviour (Keyes, 1981: 31.) Differentiation is an opposite process, where by groups increase the cultural distance between them, again with respect to same aspects of their behaviour. He argues that assimilation is more complex process than previously thought, while groups may be assimilating in some ways, they may also differentiating themselves in other aspects (Keyes, 1981: 32). Assimilation often takes place not on a group level but on a individual level. Assimilation does not necessary lead to a group's achieving an accepted

place within a society (Keyes, 1981: 32). The process of marginalization of different ethnic identities of a society or state should be decreased and process of assimilation should be enhanced by positive activities. Moreover cultural ties are strong and barriers are still not easily broken.

Continuing with the assimilation process, Warner described another dimension of it. He explained that the term assimilation means the process of becoming alike (Keyes, 1981: 32). It is considered that assimilation is a process by which a group, generally a minority or an immigrant group is through contact absorbed into a culture of another group or groups. Positive and constructive interaction between different ethnic identities can contribute in the development of a state. The process of economic and political modernization increases the connectedness of, and competition within modern systems. As per modernization tends to decrease ethnic diversity in terms of the number of distinct ethnic organizations within a given system under conditions of resource competition. It is perceived that through effective state building policies local political boundaries can be resolved in favour of a uniform set of relations. The exposure of diverse and disconnected small scale ethnic groups to a dominating economic and political environment and their subjection to the same laws and regulations, hence tends to eliminate sub-national economic and political differences in favour of the expansion and strengthen of the central state. Modernization in such a way results in a decline of small scale ethnic identities. Political manifestation may increase in scope and intensity during advanced stages of modernization.

Heterogeneous societies find it very difficult to evolve a stable and viable political system. Consequently ethnic identities vigorously re-emerged on the political scenario. Conflict is a concept on which many scholars have written and have tried to explain the phenomenon.

Noam Chomesky explains that conflict is by-product of the culture of society (Chomesky, 1998: 6). Some say conflict is not natural but various factors contribute towards it. It is not part of human nature but circumstances are created, which lead to conflicting situation. Some say when society is divided into haves and have nots, society resort to coercive and violent action. Ethnic conflict simply can be defined as the violent clash or struggle involving groups of people who identify themselves with a specific geographical region and share similar culture and social traits as well as highly developed sense of awareness. Conflicts are usually of two types such as, latent conflict and explicit conflict. Latent conflicts are the conditions already existing in the psyche of an individual, group, bloc or the society. It is reflected through jokes, statements, quotes or the literature produced by the individuals. Inwardly conflict resides in the social fabric of the society but it does not come into lime light until and unless it breaks out.

Ethnicity and Conflict

Explicit conflicts are the occurrences of violent acts, which are happened and are apparent. Most of the work has been done on explicit conflict. The developing polities have been facing a number of events of explicit ethnic identities conflicts. Policy makers of developing states for preserving their specific personal interests or entertaining their personal wishes do not hesitate to push different ethnic identities into violent conflicting situation, instead of establishing stable political system and participatory decision making. Latent differences among various ethnic identities became explicit by the policies of ruling authorities. Semi-peripheral and peripheral ethnic identities try to emerge into core, whenever they found their identity into danger. While on the other hand resist against such moves and this resistance most of the time occur in the form of serious conflict. Core ethnic identity does not show flexibility in its attitude regarding its traditions and dogmas. When periphery interacts with core, this process erodes some values, which receive serious resistance from the core. Political stability, peace, harmony and unity can be achieved through removal of sense of deprivation among various ethnic identities and it is only possible if there is economic equilibrium at various levels and all the economic fruits of growth are equitably distributed among all the ethnic identities without making any kind of discrimination on the basis of language, region, religion, race, caste and etc. ethnic identities come into conflict only when they are deprived of basic necessities of life. It happens, when a particular ethnic becomes successful to secure power at the helm of the affairs and try to formulate policies in the best interests of their own specific group by ignoring other ethnic identities. Under such circumstances deprived ethnic groups resist against all those policies, which do not facilitate them. Ethnic identities appear to be solid, beautiful if placed properly, attractive if roles are defined and committedly performed. Apparently developed societies look peaceful and coherent, but from inside, the erosion is there, destabilizing factors undermine structure and poisonous trees grow in the social soil. Developing polities are fraught with unbalance placing of ethnic identities. Developing states remain unable to manage properly different segments of the society.

Based on above given various definitions, it can be safely stated that an ethnic identity is characterized in terms of multiplicity of attributes, which positively contribute in the process to develop a sense of oneness among different groups of individuals. From all definitions of ethnic identity, one derives some characteristics of an ethnic group such as:

- A collective name
- A common myth of descent
- A shared history
- A distinctive shared culture
- An association with a specific territory

- A sense of solidarity
- A shared language
- A common religion
- Common profession

Different ethnic identities interact with each other in a given socio-political structure of the society or state. During this interaction sometimes imbalances emerge and create conditions of conflict. Perceptions or misperceptions, biases or prejudices are the outcome of interaction of ethnic identities. The ethnic identities, if are not placed properly, the power and economic forces on one side and socio-political factors from the other side create a gulf, which leads to conflict. Instead of getting into detail of interaction, it is not out of context to discuss the causes of conflict. There are different causes of conflict among different ethnic identities such as:

- Power sharing
- Economic inequality
- Socio-cultural setting and rivalries
- External factors
- Process of social change

Power Sharing

Sometimes a specific ethnic identities hold power through legitimate way but they follow the policy of discrimination, preferential treatment and displacement of other ethnic identities. The outcome in such conditions is hatred, enmity, antagonism and conflict. The deprived ethnic identities resist against such policies of ruling elite and if their resistance remained unaddressed by the authorities then these identities do not find any other way out to achieve their objectives except to take up the arms for getting equal opportunities. The role of the state is very much important in the process of creating harmony among different ethnic identities. Sometimes intentionally or unintentionally governments formulate such policies, which become a major reason to widen gulf between ethnic identities. But the important role of government cannot be ignored. It has been observed that a legitimate ruling authority plays more effective role to resolve the problems of various segments of the societies. The state and ruling elite must be accepted as legitimate if their integrative efforts are to receive popular support (Sayeed, 1995: 71). In case of many developing polities legitimacy most of the times remained a crucial question. Rulers try to become the center of power by all means and the phenomenon of sharing power is not so much popular in developing polities. Effective participation is possible in a representative system, where power is defused among plurality of institutions; and greater and wider the degree of participation of people in the national decision making

process will open the door for evolutionary changes instead of violent changes. Democracy is the form of government, which contains panacea for curing its own ills from within.

Economic Inequality

Economic interdependence is another factor through which peace, harmony and integration can be realized, small units even with ample financial autonomy cannot think of existing as independent entities, purely if they are tied economically with each other. All ethnic identities should be given according to their pressing need for development. Economic planning should be evolved on sustainability. Uninterrupted access to economic resources should be provided to different ethnic identities of state for exploiting these resources according to their capability. Economic resources should be distributed judiciously among different ethnic groups, instead of being monopolized by one or two ethnic identities. It is very important to create harmony among different ethnic identities to articulate interests and government should try to fulfill the needs of the people. A stable political system can have extractive, regulative and distributive capabilities. With the proper utilization of these capabilities system can extract material and natural resources and government can distribute these resources among different ethnic identities on equal basis.

Economic inequality is created by

Impeded access to economic resources

Unemployment

Poverty, unequal distribution of economic resources

Corruption

Economic inequality provides a way to deprived people to use all means either right or wrong to acquire their specific objective.

Socio-Cultural Setting and Rivalries

A plural society presents various cultural patterns. Some ethnic identities have prestigious place due to having better qualification and economic opportunities. They participate in decision making process and become successful to formulate policies in best interests of their own specific identity. Under these circumstances deprived groups take up arms to get their rights. They become violent and disturbed law and order situation of state. Various ethnic identities have prejudice against each other, which is perceived highly

as a negative attitude. Prejudice can be defined as readiness to respond to a person in an unfavourable manner on the basis of his or her group membership (Ahmar, 1999: 209). In a multiethnic state, mostly in case of developing states, system finds it very difficult to place all ethnic identities at their appropriate positions. Different ethnic identities compete with each other for securing resources and it has been observed that when groups involve in competition prejudicial attitude will take place within each group. This attitude can pose serious threat to the integrity of existing system. So one ethnic group is deprived of social, educational, and economic opportunities by an other group and individuals of deprived group fee that the doors to success are closed to them. The deprived group perceived itself as an inferior identity and gets a justification to initiate hostile activity against the superior group or against the existing system.

External Factors

A political system has to face many internal as well as external problems when it remains unable to manage properly different ethnic identities. Deprived identities do not hesitate to use forcible means for securing their specific interests. Under these circumstances external hostile forces use propaganda or provide incentives and support by which insurgency or belligerency can take place, which have potential to create serious threat to the existence of a state.

Process of Social Change

Social change is a process which introduces many concomitant processes, which directly or indirectly, negatively or positively affect the identities within a society. Political socialization, social mobilization, industrialization and other related process bring changes in the behavioural pattern of different ethnic identities. When political institutions fail to control the change, the system either faces breakdown or collapse. A stable political system has potential to manage different ethnic identities in an organized way. Developing states remain unable to create a proper awareness among different ethnic identities regarding various issues. Proper representation is also not given to different ethnic groups in decision making process. Few Ethnic groups become successful to dominate policy making process while others feel they do not have right to decide their destination themselves.

After discussing the causes it is not out of context to discuss a mechanism by which conflict can be minimized. There are different strategies such as:

- Legitimate judicious Political structure
- Equal opportunities

- Education and system capabilities

Legitimate Judicious Political Structure

Members at the helm of the affairs should be true representatives of people. They should try to formulate such policies, which would be appreciated by various segments of the society at the in put end. Political structure in most of the developing polities is dominated not by the elected members from the grassroots level but by defacto rulers and they do not formulate policies according to the expectations of people. A legitimate system can create stability. Participation, more specifically the sharing of power is very crucial for mitigating distribution grievances among different ethnic identities. Political instability encourages the social diversity, which creates conflict among different ethnic identities. Different ethnic identities consider that economic opportunities, civil rights and particularly political privileges are not equally distributed among them. Deprived ethnic identities resist against such moves. They feel they are deprived of their legitimate rights. It is perceived necessary to develop a stable political system that various ethnic identities should be given an opportunity to express their concerns regarding different policies, which are formulated by the ruling authority. Freedom of expression enables a society to be more progressive and dynamic (kazi, 1976: 343). A political system can play an effective role in the process of peace, stability and harmony by having various characteristics such as, legitimacy; system has potential to face different shocks, in other words a system should has maintenance and sustenance capability.

Equal Opportunities

Ethnic identities come into conflict only when they face imbalance in society. Equal opportunities should be provided to different ethnic identities in decision making process. Economic resources should be judiciously distributed among different ethnic identities. It is necessary to develop a responsible political system that individual of different ethnic identities should be given equal opportunities to flourish their capabilities in different walks of life. If ruling authority imposes restrictions on freedom of thought, expression and action of a specific ethnic identities and promote the interests of a specific ethnic identities, such a policy of ruling authority gives birth negativity in actions of deprived ethnic group. The absence of distributive justice and equal opportunities in social and political institutions lead to discord. Equal participation of all groups of society in decision making process enhances the pace of development at all levels and negation of their rights will provide them a space to make sporadic bids for autonomy and even independence(Ahmar, 1999: 209). Ethnic identities assert their status in case of loss of confidence in the existing state system, which is perceived to present the exclusive interests

of certain ethnic groups. Under such circumstances deprived ethnic group start to realize that their aspirations are not fulfilled by the authority. This sense of realization becomes a major source to produce feelings of disappointment. It is perceived that sense of deprivation is very powerful emotion, which has potential to bring about attitudinal change in behaviour patterns to the extent that discontented ethnic identities get a justification in violence in order to achieve their specific interests.

Education and System Capabilities

Education should be provided to all people on equal basis and in same system. In this way people would be able to develop common feelings. Education is a major factor in minimizing ethnic tension. Education can play a positive role if system has capability to accommodate different ethnic identities and is open for accepting the different process of social change. System should have capability to generate resources and to utilize these resources in best interests of people. Most of the developing polities culturally are plural societies but it has been observed that their ruling elite are often comprised of representatives from one or two ethnic groups. They dominate all spheres of government and their personal ideology becomes the official ideology of the state. Their ideology also influences educational policies of state. It is considered that an equitable representation of all ethnic identities in the national curriculum can enhance the process of national integration. But if ruling elite does not show seriousness towards the socio-political ordering generated several conflicting situations among various cultural identities of a society (Kazi, 1994: 4-6). Government through education should groom members of various ethnic identities in such a way that they start to have this sense of realization that survival of one ethnic group depends on the survival of other. Education can play a pivotal role to create peace, harmony and integration in a society. Particularly the governments of developing states through education must pay appropriate attention on their specific ideology, culture, scientific advancement, economic development, modernization and adaptability capability for accepting change that is going to be happened at the world level by every passing day.

Conclusion

It is not only the developing states of the world, which are torn by ethnic strife. Even the industrialized states of the world, with well organized systems are troubled by ethno-centric feelings. Though developed states through well organized policies and proper planning become successful to get control over various ethnic conflicting situations. Developing polities try to manage ethnic identities but in the absence of proper planning and political instability, these states remain unable to win the confidence of different ethnic identities. Political stability and the phenomenon of decentralization can be highly

effective to manage various ethnic identities in an appropriate way by giving them privileges on the basis of equality without making any kind of discrimination on the basis of race, colour, region, language and religion. Ethnic identities are not destructive; they have potential to contribute positively and constructively in the developmental process of state but only when they are taken into confidence by the authorities and given their due share in the policy making process.

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Ethnicity and Conflict

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