Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict in Pakistan

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Abstract

There is hardly any state in the world, which is not ethnically plural. Pakistan is also no   exception in this regard. Pakistan is a country with unique ethnic diversity. This present study focuses on the concept of ethnicity and different variables such as religion, language, territory and caste, which have potential to give birth violent conflicts among different ethnic identities of Pakistan. Process of national integration can be secured only when ethnic identities would be given adequate representation according to the constitution to decide their future themselves and opportunities to flourish their specific cultural identity. Ethnic identities come into conflict when they face imbalance in the society. Economic resources should be judiciously distributed among different ethnic identities. Political system should have capability to articulate social capital on the proper place according to their intellectual level. System should have capability to generate resources and to utilize these resources in the best interest of various segment of society. Political system should initiate various economic, social and political measures to curb ethnic conflict.

Key words: Ethnic diversity, prescribed limits, imbalance society, judiciously distributed, articulate social capital

Introduction

Stratification and diversification with variegated dimensions and context, is an inbound mechanism of social fabric of a society and state. Different scholars studied this phenomenon with different tools and methodologies. Some name ethnicity as minority, group[1], race, caste, class, inner and outer group. There are others who studied it in terms of insiders and outsiders, the others, nationalities, aborigines, and immigrants[2]. Ethnicity and ethnocentrism as a concept have been of recent origin, though the phenomenon of ethnicity is not new.

After the nation building efforts of Bismarck and Garibaldi succeeded in Europe during the 19th century, the European states were mainly considered mono-national states[3], where the influence of any sub-national ethnic group

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was largely neglected. After the end of Second World War, with numerous multinational and multiethnic identities got independence.[4] After getting independence from the clutches of colonial masters most of the post colonial states have faced the problem of ethnicity in one form or the other ever since.[5] In many cases ethnic assertion has assumed violent forms. Since the end of Cold War and the dissolution of Soviet Union, various centrifugal forces based upon ethnicity, regionalism, sectarianism, etc. have manifested themselves as a substitute, for ideology-based style of politics. Ethnicity in particular has sprung up as a most pronounced political phenomenon in post communist world. South Asian region is also no exception in this regard.[6]

Western democracies as well as socialist states of Europe are plagued by ethnic, regional, linguistic, religious and cultural minorities, old and new.[7] Kazakhstan, Estonia, Armenia, Azerbaijan faced various ethnic conflicts being part of Soviet Union and in East

Europe different countries such as Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Yugoslavia faced numerous problems [8] and in non- communist world different states such as Nether land, Belgium, Spain, Ireland Canada and America have been facing different ethnic problems.[9]

 All these examples are a reminder that the problem of ethno-nationalism remains unsolved despite the socialist or secular democratic political framework, which may otherwise have many other achievements to their credit. Srilanka faced Sinhalese Tamil conflict[10], India has been facing Mezzo and Naga problem[11] and Pakistan has faced the process of disintegration in form of separation of East Pakistan in 1971 in very short period of its independence. There were certain reasons of this separation such as Bengalis were major portion of population of Pakistan but their language was not given due status soon after creation of Pakistan. Bengalis resisted violently when Urdu was declared as national language of Pakistan. Punjabi ruling elite dominated political scenario of Pakistan after 1947 and Bengalis felt they are just a colony of West Pakistan.

Many countries of the world have been experiencing some sort of ethno dissonance encompassing various level of intensity of politicized ethnicity.[12] Even developed countries of the world such as U.S.A and Britain do suffer with this phenomenon.[13] However, it is not so much conspicuous as it is in the developing countries of the world. There are many ethnic groups in different parts of the world, which have been demanded or demanding a separate province, state or region within the same country or greater autonomy for their existing province or a separate and independent state.[14] For instance the plight of Turkish community in Bulgaria, massacres and retaliatory mass killings and looting between Senegalese and Mauritanians, the explosive situation in the Soviet Republic of Georgia, Armenia,

Azerbaijan and Tajikistan etc.[15] Britain which appeared to have achieved national integration to a high degree, the growing strength of Scottish and Welsh nationalist groups in pressing their demand for greater autonomy in their respective regions is an open question.[16] The Basque nationalists in Spain, the Eritrain in the Ethopia, the Kashmiris and Sikh in democratic and secular India, the Moros of Philippines, the Tibetan insurrection in the Peoples Republic of China. The list is endless and unfortunately a growing one. Pakistan too, has undergone the agonizing experience of a civil war resulting in the break up of country.

Before going into detail it will not be out of context to define the concept of ethnicity.

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".[17] According to Cambridge Encyclopedia:
"It is group of individuals identified on the bases of race, colour, language and territory".[18]

According to Devos:
"An ethnic group is a self-perceived inclusion those who hold in common a set of traditions not shared by others with when they are in contact. Such traditions typically include folic, religious belief and practices, language, a sense of historical continuity and common ancestry or place of origin".[19]
However the Encyclopedia Britannica described ethnic group in much more elaborate way:

"A social group or category of population that in a larger society is set apart and bound together by common ties of race, language, nationality or 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".[20]

One can define that ethnicity is a group of individuals living side by side but not intermingling with each other. These 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. Ethnicity itself is not harmful for the existence of any state. The intensity of different variables creates contradictory point of view and hostile environment within the territory of any state. For example in Balochistan Baloch do not feel comfortable with other ethnic identities because they feel that outsiders are a

major source to deprive them from different economic social and political advantages. Baloch often come into conflict with other ethnic identities.

Based on above given various definitions, it can be safely generalized that an ethnic group is characterized in terms of multiplicity of attributes such as religion, caste, region, language, nationality, race, colour and culture. One can derive some common characteristics of an ethnic group such as: collective name, common Myth of descent, shared history, distinctive shared culture, association with a specific territory, sense of solidarity, shared language and common religion.

It will not be out of context to give brief introduction of interactional pattern of different ethnic identities with special reference of Pakistan since its creation till today. Some writers, intellectuals and religious elite believe that Pakistan was created on the basis of Islam, and Islam as an ideological power dominates all socio-cultural barriers.[21] Theoretically, it reflects the truth because Muslims are one and during the freedom movement, the underlying objective was to establish a state where Islamic ideology would prevail[22] but immediately after partition this ideological support could not be provided and the tempo of the ideological fervour, which was the mobilization factor during the freedom movement it could not be kept at the peak in the post independence period.

Since 1947, the society and state of Pakistan has been caught in the whirpool of divergent cross cutting social-political fiber. The country is fraught with multifarious problems of crucial and intricate nature but ethnicity has emerged as the most significant and delicate issue. The dilemma before Pakistan has been to create a national identity out of diverse regional and linguistic loyalities.[23] Ideology was considered to be the suitable dough for the workable mould of Pakistan, but ideas were frustrated when the socio-regional linguistic and racial realities began surfacing and ideological hegemony was being eroded. Therefore, ethnic identities emerged in 1948. The Bengalis became vocal and resorted agitational tactics when Urdu was declared national language. Their contention was that the language of majority should be accepted as national language, the students of Dhaka University took out procession in favour of their language and government instead of persuading them, opted for lathi-charge and imprisonment of the protestors.[24] This incident provided incentive to ethnic identities to re-emerge. Bengalis were not happy even with Objective Resolution in 1949. The attitude of religious clergy towards the non –Muslims minorities and especially on the issue of Ahmedies (in 1953 ulemas started protest against Ahmedis in Lahore and Punjab government got assistance from Pakistan Army through federal government to get control over the situation of Lahore) opened a door for minorities to strengthen their cores and they demanded more rights for their existence.

Political elite of different provinces, who were very important, but had lost their turfs after partition failed to reconcile with their displacement and as they were too weak to re-inforce their personalities, they projected regional sentiments. Sindh Mutthida Mahaz, Jeay Sindh, Baloch Verna, Pakhtun Zalmry and National Awami Party, these parochial parties became active in putting demands on political system of Pakistan for giving them provincial autonomy. Central ruling authority intentionally or unintentionally adopted such policies, which widened gulf between East and West Pakistan. Ill planed economic strategies followed by the central government, kept East Pakistan under-developed. The door of the power structure (politico, administrative and military) was closed on the Bengalis on one pretext or the other. For instance, the era of Ayub Khan (1958-1969) especially harbored an ethnic bias. In this era twenty two families controlled two-third of Pakistan's industries assets, 80% of banking and 70% of insurance companies, majority of them were from West Pakistan.[25] Such kind of economic policies became a major source to create a sense of insecurity among Bengalis and consequently, Sheikh Mujeeb presented Six-Point formula, which was ethnically triggered, politically mobilized and ethnically fuelled, brought serious upheavals. The elections of 1971 remained unable to bridge the gulf between East and West Pakistan. These elections paved a way for dismemberment process of Pakistan. East Pakistan emerged as an independent state of Bangladesh.

Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto who entered in the power parlour was unable to bridle the forces, which he himself had unleashed. G.M Syed in Sindh, Mengals in Balochistan and Khan and Khataks in Khyber Pakhtun Khawa became more vocalists against the central ruling authority. The provincial political factions flared ethnicity. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto did not take the identities seriously. The germs of regionalism got fertile soil in Sindh. Karachi attracted the majority of Urdu speaking people, who began to play a significant role in the economic life of the province, displacing the local elite, who cultivated pro-sindh feelings among the local people.[26] Local Sindhis began hating the urdu speaking. Baloch in Balochistan were not satisfied with the central ruling authority. Pathans were also dissatisfied with the federal government. General Zia –ul-Haq played a different game to deal with different ethnic identities. In Sindh he supported Urdu speaking people to counter local Sindhis and PPP (Pakistan People Party). In Balochistan he supported nationalist leaders through providing them advantages. Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif government also remained unable to control the unleashed forces and situation became worse by every passing day. ® General Pervez Musharraf launched various operations against the extremist elements (extremist elements are those elements who showed rigidity regarding state internal as well as external policies) of society of Pakistan during his regime. President Asif Ali Zardari government has been playing an important role to fight against terrorism.

Here it is deemed necessary to highlight different factors which are a major source to give birth conflicts among different ethnic groups of Pakistan.

After the separation of East Pakistan it was thought that Pakistan might emerged as unified entity in South Asia. But it could not happen. The heterogeneous society of Pakistan remained unable to evolve a viable and stable political system. Runaq Jahan aptly pointed out that Pakistan emerged as a state but failed to create nationalism.[27] Consequently ethnic identities vigorously re-emerged on the political scenario. Ethnic groups who were under represented felt grievances and so they resisted, which resulted in conflicting situation. It is still continuing though different governments devised various policies such as to provide opportunities to different ethnic groups to participate in policy making process but desired results could not be achieved.

There are different variables which have been playing a vital role in generating more conflicting situation in the country such as ethnic conflict on religious ground, ethnic conflict on the basis of language, ethnic conflict on the basis of territoriality and ethnic conflict on the basis of caste.

Ethnic Conflict on Religious Ground

In case of Pakistan it is truly stated that ruling elite remained unable to maintain ethnic identities positively. Political socialization and institutionalization of masses could not be brought-forth due to less economic resources and their unequal distribution among different segments of society. After the death of Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Prime Minister Khan Liaquat Ali Khan, political leaders who assumed power were politically weak and could not develop strong democratic political system which was necessary for equal representation of all ethnic identities of Pakistan. Ruling elite not only military but civilian also exploited the differences among different religious groups for strengthening their power base. Religious groups such as Jamat-e-Islami and Jamiat-ul-ulema-e-Islam always got opportunity during military rule in restrictive atmosphere to manipulate their identities. But religious leaders remained unable to devise a cohesive policy for the well being of common people due to severe ideological differences among their ranks. In Pakistan's peculiar circumstances, the differences between Shia and Sunni (Shia and Sunni have differences over the performance of different rituals of Islam) preclude any possibility of the acceptance by the entire nation of a truly religious state with a single religious ideology. Infact more the state regulates the lives of the people in religious matter to suit its own requirement; the more are the Muslims religious minorities likely to resent and resist this move (Zia's Islamic reforms created conflicting situation among Shia and Sunni sects).

Even among the Sunni Blocs, sharp differences exist in religious beliefs and practices. Sub-blocs the most prominent of these being the Brelavi and Deobandi. These religious groups do not want to perform their religious practices at same place under same imam. Whenever the efforts have been made to bring them close to each other by the state or by religious Zealots, serious trouble has resulted.

For preserving their own specific personal interests rulers pushed different religious groups into war of sectarianism. Latent differences among different religious groups became explicit by the policies of General Zia-ul-Haq in 1977. General Zia's era was an era of politico-religious indoctrination, which widened gulf between Sunni and Shia groups.[28] Sectarianism emerged more forcefully in the era of General Zia. The organized gangs of sectarian thug by Sunni and Shia sects were involved in sectarian violence and serial killings. This attitude created an atmosphere of unrest and polarization in the country in 1980s and 1990s.In a society like Pakistan, which is heterogeneous in nature and homogeneous on the name of Islam, obviously Islam has significant role to play for creating balance among different ethnic groups. But religion could not prove a binding force among different ethnic groups.[29] Conflicts between Shia and Sunni sects became order of the day during Zia regime. The role of Ulemas was very crucial because the people of both these sects have great affiliation with religion but with weak knowledge about the basic principles of Islam they follow ulemas of their specific sect. Ulemas propagated very narrow-minded creeds by which religious bigotry and fanaticism acquired militate overtones. Sunni sect started to attack Imambarghas and Shia sect for settling score attack on the mosques of Sunni sect. Minor differences were there among Sunni and Shia sect and remained dormant most of the times but the policies of the government of General Zia to give preference to Sunni than Shia converted minor implicit conflicts into major explicit conflicts which not only polluted the political environment of country but also widened the already existing gulf between Sunni and Shia. Religious leaders of Sunni and Shia group received economic assistance in form of funds and Zakat from foreign countries and they opened Madrassa and enrolled thousand of students within the country as wellas from other countries.[30] These Madrassas also trained these students militarily. These trained students played an important role during Afghan war in 1979. These militant groups of society started to pose serious threat to the integrity of state. After 9/11 incident the government of Pakistan started to play a significant role against war on terror. Musharraf regime formulated various policies to tackle extremist elements of society. Religious forces became active for achieving their specific objectives. Suicide bombing created terror in the society of Pakistan. Law enforcement agencies have been initiating different steps to control extremist elements of society.

Ethnic Conflict On the Basis of Language.

The politics of Pakistan is basically the politics of linguistic groups. Pakistan is a multilingual state, where the Pakhtuns, Sindhi, Balochi, Punjabi, Mohajir and Siraiki identities are expressed through Pashto, Sindhi, Balochi, Punjabi, Urdu and Siraiki Languages. It is pertinent to mention here that ethnic identities of Pakistan adopted language factor as powerful tool for asserting their power and launched language movements for determining their identity. Language issue created serious threat for the integrity of state particularly the Bengali language issue. Language can be unifying force, it can also awaken and sustain a community sense of its separate existence as with other symbols of identities.[31] The single issue, which caused the most bitterness and the major factor for the alienation of Bengalis, was the language question. They insisted on the recognition of Bengali as the national language along with Urdu. Bengalis were in majority but their demand to give their language the status of national language was ignored. This attitude of ruling elite created sense of Bengali nationalism. Later on status of national language was given to Bengali but existing gulf cannot be bridged and this gulf led towards the separation of East Pakistan in 1971.

Sindhi language is an important aspect of Sindhi identity in the presence of Urdu-speaking Mohajirs. Sindhi is considered as an essential part of cultural heritage by Sindhi ethno-nationalist.[32] Ethnic problem is highly important in Sindh where Sindhi, Mohajirs, Punjabis, Pathans, Baloch, and Gujrati are interacting with each other. These linguistic groups have been involved in conflicting situation with each other on various occasions. Language riots broke out in sindh in 1972 as a result of challenging the dominance of Urdu. Sindhi nationalists became active in the politics of Sindh. During Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto Regime Sindh Assembly passed a bill declaring Sindhi as the official language of Sindh.[33] Mohajirs demonstrated against the bill in Karachi and Hyderabad and serious riots erupted between Sindhi and Urdu speaking ethnic groups. Government through issuing an ordinance in favour of Urdu diffused tension between two groups.

Balochi, Brahvi, Pashto are spoken by major ethnic groups in Balochistan. Baloch have been facing different problems since 1947. They perceive they have been deprived by the central ruling authority to preserve their specific identity. In 1972, Baloch felt a sigh of relief after having their own government in the province of Balochistan. Baloch were hopeful that their language would get due status. But in 1972, the Governor of Balochistan , who was non other than the well known Baloch nationalist, Ghaus Baksh Bizenjo declared Urdu as the language of official correspondence and routine office work.[34] It was done by the Baloch government to avoid any conflicting situation between Baloch, Pathans and Brahvis. Language issue was exploited by the Baloch politicians for securing maximum power. But

they gave air to the hidden flames of distrust among major ethnic groups and sub groups.

In Khyber Pakhtun Khawa majority of population speak Pashto. Pakhtun nationalists always supported their language. Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan always used Pashto as an identity marker even in the days of pre-partition. NAP (National Awami Party) supported Pashto throughout the period of One Unit and during Yahya Khan Regime. But surprisingly, when NAP came into power in 1972, it declared Urdu as official language of Khyber Pakhtun Khawa. Pathans did not create so much trouble for the integrity of Pakistan due to language issue because Pakhtuns have become more prosperous and better integrated in the economic and power structure of Pakistan.

Southern Punjab is known as the Siraiki area. The area is, on the whole, underdeveloped and the Siraiki language movement started in the 1960s. Sense of ethnic nationalism emerged among Siraiki speaking people due to injustice, lack of development, less access to power, goods and services. Siraiki-speaking people dislike or oppose distribution of Siraiki areas to non-Siraikies. The sense of deprivation among Siraiki speaking in southern Punjab has led to the assertion of a separate identity of which language is the most powerful symbol.

Punjabis dominate political structure of Pakistan and being rulers give less importance to Punjabi than other ethnic identities.

Ethnic Conflict On the Basis of Territoriality.

Territoriality has been another dominant cause for sowing seeds of conflicting situation among different ethnic groups of different regions of Pakistan. Issues like distribution of economic resources through NFC (National Finance Commission), water-sharing problem between provinces and dominant position of one ethnic group at the power structure created a sense of alienation among deprived ethnic identities.

The basic structure of Pakistan is that of a federation comprising federating units (called provinces). After 9 years the constitution of 1956 was framed. The 1956 constitution had 3 lists of powers such as federal, provincial and concurrent.[35] This constitution remained unable to resolve the problem of provincial autonomy because people of East Pakistan and deprived provinces of west Pakistan were not happy with Punjabi domination. The 1962 constitution provided for a presidential form of government. The provincial governors performed their functions according to the expectations of central ruling authority and created a sense of alienation among the people of both wings. Ill planned economic and political strategies followed by the central ruling elite kept under developed to different ethnic identities.

Particularly Bengalis were not happy with the policies of central ruling authority. The constitution of 1973 had a federal and concurrent list leaving the residuary powers to provinces.[36] Concurrent list has been abolished by the Pakistan Peoples Party government. The main intention of government is to create a strong sense of responsibilities on the part of provinces that they have authority to manage their affairs themselves. Federal government should try to take into confidence the government of different provinces regarding formulation process of various domestic and external policies. It has been observed that whenever central government finds that the policies of any province not compliance with the center, it dismisses the government of that province as it was done in case the government of NAP in Balochistan by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto.[37] Political stability, peace, harmony and unity can be achieved through removal of sense of deprivation among various ethnic groups and it is only possible if there is economic equilibrium at national as well as at regional level and all the economic fruits of growth are equitably distributed among all the ethnic groups without making any kind of discrimination. Ethnic groups come into conflict when they are deprived from basic necessities of life. It happens when a particular group becomes successful to have authority at the helm of the affairs and formulates policies in the best interests of their own specific group by ignoring other ethnic groups. Ultimately deprived group resists against such policies and this resistance can be in form of violent conflicting situation. For instance, during Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto era Sindhis became successful to have more facilities than Urdu speaking Mohajirs in the province of Sindh. These moves created tussle between Sindhis and Mohajirs. Economic resources should be allocated according to the pressing needs of ethnic groups of different regions. National Finance commission is the constitutional organ for the allocation of state revenues among the federation and units. Smaller provinces were not happy regarding allocation of resources based on the percentage of population of each unit. Small provinces used to feel a sense of deprivation, when Punjab having large population achieved more resources than Sindh , Khyber Pakhtun Khawa and Balochistan. Pakistan Peoples Party government altered the formula to allocate resources among province on the basis of population.

Another irritant, which becomes cause of conflict among different ethnic groups of Pakistan, is domination of one province or one specific ethnic group at the power structure. Ruling elite always followed the policy of centralization of power instead of decentralization. Pakistan had to face disintegration process due to this policy.

Ethnic Conflict on the basis of Caste.

In caste tained Pakistan, the biradary system is strong and deep rooted. The Arains of Toba Tek Singh, the Makhdoom of Hala and Chaudhris of Gujrat

would vote for their own Kith and Kin. There is a chain of main castes and sub-castes. For the time being different caste groups become dormant but again emerge with new name. Caste –based conflicts usually can be observed during the elections. Caste system not only dominates rural politics but also the politics of urban areas.

Electoral process is one of the major variables that can contribute in determining the role of different castes groups in politics. In the countryside collective clan voting has a huge impact on election result. During the elections attempts are made to add fuel to fire of ethnic conflicts. Eminent members of different ethnic groups are assassinated in order to sabotage the election process. Instead of discouraging this trend, some politicians extract political mileage out of it and as a consequence give further depth to the roots of ethnic hatred. Caste system plays an important role in the politics of Pakistan than the political parties. Generally it can be stated that with the working of political parties ethnic groups are assimilated in the main stream of the society. In Pakistan political parties are vehicle of the castes to obtain power. Political parties issue party tickets to those candidates who belong to dominant caste. In all Pakistan's national elections it can be observed that caste system has been effectively hegemonic not only in rural areas but in urban centers too. People of a specific caste cast their vote to the candidate who is from their specific caste without analyzing the manifesto of relative candidate. Caste system is one of the major sources to give birth tension among different segments of society.

Conclusion

Inter –ethnic group conflict in Pakistan, has destabilized the political system and undermine foundations of the state. The inter-tribal conflict in the tribal areas, the Sindhi and non-Sindhi violent conflict in Sindh, Shia-Sunni cruel and regressive activities have become a norm of Pakistani society. No doubt the decision makers try their level best to diffuse the situation, control violence and minimize conflicts, but the strategies and policies, formulated and implemented in the country fall short of achieving the objectives. In many ways the policies backfired and the situation was aggravated to a point of insecurity. Whenever escalation takes place the government and agencies try their utmost to deescalate the conflict. The ethnic imbalance demanded the society a lot is to be done.

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