

---

## UNIT 26 ETHNICITY AND NATION-STATE

---

### Structure

- 26.1 Introduction
- 26.2 Ethnicity and Nation-state: Conceptualisation
- 26.3 Perspectives to study Ethnicity
- 26.4 Manifestation of Ethnicity
- 26.5 Response of the State
- 26.6 The Main Cases of Ethnicity in India
  - 26.6.1 North-East India
  - 26.6.2 Tamil Nadu
  - 26.6.3 Punjab
  - 26.6.4 Jammu and Kashmir
- 26.7 Summary
- 26.8 Exercises

---

### 26.1 INTRODUCTION

---

India, like any other third world country after achieving Independence from the colonial rule, was engaged with the project of nation- building. The leadership of the country at that time believed that the only way to achieve the overall development of society was to have democratic political system in the country based on the principles of secularism, liberty, equity, socialism, which were guaranteed in the Constitution of the country. To achieve these principles the state introduced the Nehruvian or Mahalanobis model of development. But the project of nation-building with main purpose to achieve democracy and development had to be carried out amidst the ethnic diversities in the country. Apart from the caste, religious and tribal groups, the diversities in India ranged in terms of culture, languages and regional development. With different levels of development and histories, different regions and cultural groups in the country could pose a real challenge to the nation- building. Moreover, the strategic location on the international borders of the North-East, Tamil Nadu, Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir made the task of nation-building more challenging. With the fresh memories of communal holocaust following the partition of the country, the goal of nation-building was the top priority of the country's leadership after achieving Independence. It was believed at that time that with the establishment of the democratic political system and overall development, the ethnicity or the diversities in India will not pose any problem in nation-building. In the process of nation-building, the ethnicity will be relegated to the background.

While in the first two decades following Independence, attempt in the quest for building India as a nation-state was basically based on the modernisation or the developmental westernisation model, from the 1980s onwards the Hindu rightist forces in the country represented by the BJP and its fraternal organisations are attempting to project India as a nation-state, or a Hindu state, based on the principles of cultural nationalism. Critical of

the Nehruvian or the developmental model, advocates of such understanding strive to remove what they consider the distortions in the policies of the state. Their attempts to introduce legislation regarding the food habits, religious preferences are indication to give priority to the Hindu religion/culture/faith. In such perspective the nation is considered as the Hindu nation-state where other religions/faiths get the secondary position. This poses challenge to the nation-state in two ways – one, it does not recognise the existence of the other faiths which disagree with it, and legitimises the social hierarchy based on the Hindu varna system; second, in reaction to this there has been mobilisation of the ethnic groups based on the religious and caste considerations. It has resulted in the communal conflicts, terrorism, protest of the low castes in the form of religious conversion, caste riots, and search for an alternative ideology which professes social change. Even the rise of dravidian movement was a reaction to the Hindu nationalism as perceived by the dravidian parties of South India.

---

## 26.2 ETHNICITY AND NATION-STATE: CONCEPTUALISATION

---

Generally ethnicity is considered as the mobilisation of a group of people who share common attributes in terms of culture, language, religion, history, etc., and who are different from another group which also shares certain common attributes. This mobilisation can be on a single attribute or more. For example mobilisation on the basis of language, religion (known as communalism in the Indian context), language, caste or tribe is considered as ethnic mobilisation. Paul R. Brass is one of the examples who uses the ethnic mobilisation and the communal mobilisation interchangeably. Dipankar Gupta differentiates between the ethnicity and communalism. He argues that ethnicity necessarily denotes mobilisation of a group in relation to another with reference to the nation-state – the territory and the sovereignty. An ethnic group either proclaims itself to be the real adherent of the faith in the territory of a nation or wants to set up a sovereign state or questions the loyalty of another group. The reference to the attributes of the nation-state can be direct or indirect. In his opinion a group mobilisation which is not referred to the attributes of the nation-state – territory or sovereignty is not ethnic mobilisation. It is simply communal mobilisation; the loyalty of a group to the nation-state is not doubted or proclaimed. In communalism it is the government, which is the reference point; the government is accused of either discriminating against or favouring the communal groups. In the changing context of time and space, communalism can turn into ethnicity and vice-versa.

A nation-state is a sovereign geographical entity whose foundation is the shared sentiments of a community based on the history, culture, language, religion or civilisation. But some scholars do not consider India as a nation-state. They argue that the basis of the foundation of a nation-state is single nation or nationality; in such a society people share a single common language, culture or even religion. Since there are a large number of the nationalities in India who speak different languages, share different cultural attributes, histories, religions, she is a multinational state, not a nation-state. However, generally, in the Indian context the terms, nation-state, nation or multinational state are used interchangeably.

---

## 26.3 PERSPECTIVES TO STUDY ETHNICITY

---

How do the people sharing common attributes of culture, language, religions within a particular territorial limits or even cutting across different regions form a group – ethnic group as distinct from such other groups? There are basically three perspectives to explain this question, the primordial, the instrumentalist, and the perspective, which combines the traits of both the primordial and the instrumentalist. According to the primordial approach the ethnic differences among the people are "given", they are inherited by them. These differences are bound to take the form of ethnic conflict between the groups. The advocates of the instrumentalist approach all believe that the ethnic differences are not "given"; they are created by the elite, who could be politicians, teachers, religious leaders, etc. The latter manipulate the social cleavages or differences for the attainment of their goal. The social cleavages which might be existing together in harmony despite their differences are translated by the elite into the ethnic differences. In particular contexts the ethnic differences culminate in the form of ethnic conflicts, riots, autonomy movements or even insurgency. The basis of social cleavages, which are turned into the ethnic groups are not always real. Some of these are even "invented" or "constructed" by the elite. The third perspective believes that both these perspectives – primordial and instrumentalists, are unable to explain the issue of ethnicity. They divide the issue into "bi-polarity". It advocates the combination of both these approaches. Its advocates argue that the primordial approach does not explain as to how people, sharing commonness, get activated into the ethnic groups. Similarly, the instrumentalist approach does not explain why people sharing common attributes respond to the call of the elite who manipulate them into the ethnic groups.

---

## 26.4 MANIFESTATION OF ETHNICITY

---

The understanding that the ethnicity will take a back seat in the face of the development which would follow as a result of the Mahalanobis model – boosting the process of nation-state building, was contested soon. Much before the results of the model became visible, the premise on which it was based was questioned. It was argued that such a model of nation-building ignored the smaller nationalities in the country. It was an imposition on them. Their identities, cultures, histories and aspirations were neglected. This model of nation-state building was antithetical to their interests. The advocates of this perspective protested against the nationalist perspective. Started with the revolt of the Nagas in the North-East, it spread to Tamil Nadu in the South, and Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir in the North. Ethnic challenge to the nation-building continued in almost all parts of the country since then, on the lines of caste, religion, region, language, tribes, etc. While a single attribute could be the most visible marker in the formation of the ethnic identity, it has been the combination of more than one which actually had provided the basis for it. Similarly, Hindu rightist forces were challenged. Its critics argued that India is not a nation-state. It is a multi-national state. Paul R. Brass in fact argued that though in practice the national level Indian policymakers followed the Mahalanobis model, they had accepted in principle the pluralist characteristics – different linguistic, religious and other minorities of the country in terms of its policies. This sort of pluralism was accepted in the national

level policies only, But the state governments often followed discriminatory and assimilative policies towards the minorities. To project that India is nation-state is virtually a denial of the existence of the pluralism and the diversities in the country.

The ethnic challenge to the nation-building/nation-state building took the following shapes in India:

- 1) Autonomy movements
- 2) Demand for secession
- 3) Insurgency
- 4) Conflicts and riots on the basis of identity markers – tribe, caste, language, religion, etc.

First three forms of ethnic manifestation are also called self-determination movements. It needs to be noted that these forms of manifestation do not follow a uniform sequence of occurrence in the country. It might start with one form and assume another form in different situations. From the 1950s onwards the conflicts based on these have been common in various regions of the country. In fact, Salig S. Harrison termed the first two decades following the Independence as the "most dangerous decades" referring to the linguistic or communal conflicts which took place in the country at that time. Very often such conflicts in the states were rooted in the local situations.

The linguistic reorganisation of the states created the states on the basis of some common linguistic traits. But there continued the conflicts on the basis of religion, native-immigrant dichotomy, dialect/linguistic controversy in many parts of the country. Demand for the autonomy within states and for the secession from the country cropped up. These often resulted in violence. While in the case of the autonomy movements, insurgency, and secessionist movements the main targets of the protagonists is the state agencies, especially identified with the central government quite often this also involves the ethnic conflict or riots between different communities in a region. But if it is a conflict/riot on the basis of language, religion, castes, tribal identity, it is mainly between different groups. In such cases the state agencies can be perceived as being partisan to a particular community or be really so as against the other. The scholars have, however, noticed that the secessionist tendencies in India have existed along with the nationalist sentiments.

---

## **26.5 RESPONSE OF THE STATE**

---

The response of the state depends on the context of political situation. The general pattern of the state response to the ethnic manifestations in India has included coercion, accommodation, causing the division within the ethnic movement, appeasement of and patronage to a particular section of the leadership of the movement, etc. Paul R Brass has argued that in the 1950s and 1960s the central government had pursued unwritten rules towards the ethnic conflicts, etc., – not considering the demand for the political recognition of the religious communities; no concession to the demand of the linguistic, regional or other culturally defined groups; and no concession to the cultural groups in conflict unless both sides support it substantially. For example, it was not until the

demand for a Punjabi Suba got the support of the leadership in Haryana for a separate Hindi speaking area that the Punjabi Suba – the state of Punjab, was created.

---

## 26.6 THE MAIN CASES OF ETHNICITY IN INDIA

---

There are several examples of ethnic manifestation in different regions of India. This section discusses the most prominent of them.

### 26.6.1 North-East India

With their distinct histories, geographical location and diverse ethnic composition, almost all the states of North-East India have been beset with the problems of ethnicity. They all have witnessed insurgency, ethnic conflicts and riots and autonomy movements in varying degrees at different points of times in the post-Independence period. They have generally taken violent forms. Even as the elements of the insurgency are present in almost all the states, it took the most strident form in Nagaland and Mizoram. There are forces in most of the states of North-East India which believe that they are not Indians; their territories have been merged with India forcibly without their consent. They would prefer to have their own sovereign nation-states. The insurgent groups in Nagaland for example did not accept the Indian Constitution, its VI schedule meant for the North-East, boycotted the first general election held in 1952 in the country, and declared to have set up their own sovereign state in exile – the Federal Republic of Nagaland. In the past two decades new insurgent groups have emerged in almost all states of the region. Supported by the foreign countries, especially the bordering neighbours, these have set up an umbrella organisation under the leadership of the NSCN (National Socialist Council of Nagaland). They question the sovereignty of the Indian state and the concept of the nation-state. The areas of Assam which are inhabited by the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos had witnessed the movement for an autonomous state in the 1960s. It resulted in the formation of a separate state of Meghalaya in 1972. In Assam, there are agitations for the creation of the autonomous states like Bodoland and Karbi Anglong, etc. The target in the insurgency is the sovereignty of the state – police, army and other institutions; the autonomy movements do not question the sovereignty of the state, but their attack also is diverted against the state agencies. The insurgency and the autonomy movements often result in the ethnic riots, especially between the tribals and non-tribals or between one or the other tribe. All these developments ultimately get linked to the state policies regarding the North-East region.

There are mainly two perspectives which analyse the issue of ethnicity and nation-building in the context of the North-East India. The first is the modernisation/development/"nation-state building" perspective. The second is the "federation-building" perspective. The former views the problems as the outcome of the following: the process of "nation-building" in the face of the conflict between the modern and tradition; the process of modernisation and transition (democratisation); conflict between the modern and traditional leadership; and the inability of the system to fulfil the aspirations of the new generation. The scholars who have used this perspective are S K Chaube, V B Singh, B G Verghese, Myron Wiener and Hiren Guhain. The second perspective is basically a critique of the first one. This perspective is available largely in the writings of the scholars who hail from the North-Eastern region. The prominent representatives of this perspective are Sanjib Baruah, Sajal

Nag, Udyan Sharma, Hiren Guhain, Sanjay Hazarika and M P Bezbaruah. In fact, Urmila Phadnis is of the opinion that the main leadership in the entire South Asia followed the notion of nationhood as per the considerations of the dominant groups and ignored the minority constituents of the society. The scholars who adhere to this perspective argue that the problems in the North-East are the result of the "nation-state building" perspective of the mainstream national level leadership. They further argue that in their quest of the "nation-state building" the dominant groups of the country represented by the central government and the mainstream leadership ignored the "periphery", the smaller nationalities of the North-East; have acted as a "step mother" to them; shown arrogant attitude; paid less attention to the human rights violation in the North-East than other parts of the country. These factors have resulted in the insurgency problem in the North-East. This perspective is well articulated in the suggestion of Sanjib Baruah that the mainstream leadership of the country should replace their "nation-state building" approach in favour of "genuine federation-building" in order to retrieve the situation.

### 26.6.2 Tamil Nadu

The most strident opposition to the notion of India as a nation-state had come in South India much before the country was freed from the colonial rule. The Dravidian movement of Tamil Nadu became the representative of this in the region. Originating in the Self-Respect Movement and later getting articulated in the form of the Justice Party, DK and DMK, the Dravidian nationalism questioned the dominant notion of the nationalism and nation-state in the country on three grounds – religion, language and caste. The pioneer of the Dravidian nationalism, E V Ramaswami Naicker, popularly known as Periyar, argued that the dominant nationalism in India was articulated by the Congress which was based on the Hindu religion or Brahminism, Hindi language and high castes, especially Brahminism. It was antithetical to the Dravidian nationalism based on non-Aryan Dravidian religion, Tamil language and the low castes. It was necessary to protect the Dravidian identity and nationalism from the domination of the North Indian high caste nationalism. These two forms of nationalism could not exist together. The demand for secession, anti-Hindi agitation and later demand for more autonomy were the examples of the implications of the challenge of ethnicity to state in South India.

The legacy of Periyar was carried forward by CM Annadurai and M Karunanidhi. Annadurai, however, disagreed with the Periyar, While Periyar held only the Brahminism responsible for the plight of the low castes, Annadurai said it was also because of the colonial policies that the domination of the North Indian high castes and Congress was established over the Dravidians. According to Annadurai, the way to liberate the Dravidas from two oppressors – colonialism and the North Indian Brahmins and Baniyas was to secede from India and set up independent Dravida Nadu. He argued that an independent, democratic republic of India would be favourable to their demand for secession. Narendra Subramanian observes that the Dravidian parties were the first political parties to challenge the hegemony of the Congress in an Indian state. Comparing the Dravidian ethnic assertion with other secessionist movements in the country, he observes that it was less violent in nature. It was basically an ideological movement. The DMK emerged as an alternative to the Congress in the 1960s, which assumed power in 1967. Since then the power in Tamil Nadu has been shared by the DMK and AIDMK with the help of 'allies.

The demand for secession, however, did not generate the mass support like those of Nagaland or Jammu and Kashmir. Nor did it generate that level of violence. The demand of secessionism was dropped by the Dravidian parties in the course of time. But the sense of their separate Tamil identity continued even after that. The secessionist tendencies gave way to the demand for the autonomy of the states in the 1960s. The Dravidian parties of Tamil Nadu became important allies of the forces which demanded autonomy in the country.

The thrust on the Dravidian culture deterred the growth of ethnicity on the lines of Hindu communalism in Tamil Nadu. Unlike other states of South India, the basis of challenge to the Hindu communalism in Tamil Nadu had been ideological.

### **26.6.3 Punjab**

The ethnicity in Punjab got manifested mainly in the form of autonomy movement and insurgency, which had the regional, religious and economic basis. Sometimes it had taken the form of the communal conflict between the Hindus and Sikhs. Punjab had witnessed the autonomy movement during the 1950s and 1960s, which was spearheaded by the Akali Dal. The Akali leadership argued that the areas of Punjab which were inhabited by the people whose mother tongue was Punjabi, and who followed Sikh religion should be given an autonomous province of their own. According to Baldev Raj Nayar, the Akali leadership followed three-pronged strategy to mobilise the support – constitutional, infiltration and agitational. The first involved the constitutional means like memoranda, rallies, marches, etc.; the second allowed a large number of the Akali Dal members to penetrate the Congress organisation and influence its decisions from within in favour of a Punjabi Suba; and the third consisted of marches to shrines, use of force, intimidation. The agitational strategy often led to violence. In fact, there were two groups within the Akali Dal, one represented by Sant Fateh Singh giving the socio-economic explanation; another was represented by Master Tara Singh who justified the demand for Punjabi Suba on the religious ground – for an autonomous province of the Sikhs.

The period from the 1980s onwards was marked by the next phase of the autonomy movement in Punjab. Unlike the earlier one, this had developed into the insurgency movement challenging the sovereignty of the Indian state and for setting up of Khalistan (the Sikh homeland) founded on the tenets of Sikh religion. It also bred the communal divide between the Sikhs and the Hindus in Punjab. Marked by the large scale violence, which resulted in innumerable deaths and colossal loss of property, the movement in Punjab challenged the edifice of the Indian nation-state. The context of the Akali agitation in this phase was different from the 1950s and 1960s. Following the decline of the Congress and rise of the Akali Dal as a significant force in Punjab changed the trends in the state politics from the late 1960s. In an attempt to retain her control on the politics of the country, and the Congress organisation, Indira Gandhi personalised the Congress and intervened in the politics of the states directly, especially in the selection of the Chief Ministers of the Congress-ruled states. This coincided with the rising demands for the change in the centre-state relations to be more favourable to the states. The challenge posed by the Akali Dal to the dominance of the Congress in Punjab in the 1970s prompted Indira Gandhi to use Sikh religious symbols to mobilise the Sikh votes. In the 1980 election to the Punjab Legislative Assembly, she took the help of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a Sikh religious leader to seek the support of Sikhs. This had two consequences. On the one hand it encouraged the religious leaders, especially Bhindranwale

to act independent of the political leadership and become belligerent. With the support of the foreign forces, he was able to rally a large number of the youth and demand a separate Sikh homeland – Khalistan. During the Khalistani movement large scale violence took place, which resulted in the assassination of Indira Gandhi, which was part of the chain of the processes following the Operation Blue Star. The Khalistan agitation had challenged the legitimacy and the sovereignty of the Indian Nation-State. On the other hand, the use of Sikh religion and the imposition of the Sikh code of conduct on the Hindus created the communal divide between the Sikhs and Hindus in Punjab. This, sometimes, culminated into communal riots and conflicts.

There are two types of explanation of the Punjab crisis as the developments there came to be addressed during the 1970s and 1980s – the socio-economic and political. The first is provided by the economists and the Marxist scholars. The main representatives of this framework are – Sucha Singh Gill, K C Singhal, Harish Kumar Puri, Joyce Pettigrew, M S Dhami, Javeed Alam and Gurharpal Singh. They argue that the roots of the Punjab crisis lie in the social and economic problems of the people, especially in the wake of the green revolution; unable to meet the cost in agriculture along with the rising unemployment, the crisis of Sikh identity caused by the impact of consumerism and modern values provided a fertile ground for the rise of militancy in Punjab. The scholars who give political explanation, for example Paul R Brass, criticise the socio-economic explanation as inadequate and reductionist. They argue, on the other hand, that the Punjab crisis has been the outcome of the political manipulation of the religion and the problems of the people by the politicians. According to Brass, it had actually been the manipulation of the services of Bhindranwale by Indira Gandhi in the context of changing centre-state relations which gave birth to the militancy in Punjab.

#### **26.6.4 Jammu and Kashmir**

The autonomy movement and insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir is linked to the geographical, historical and religious factors. Before its accession, the political leadership in the state had been divided on the issue of its relationship to the nation-state. While the king Hari Singh, who wanted to retain it as an independent state, opposed the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to India, the most popular leader of the state Sheikh Abdullah wanted it to be merged with India. But once the state got acceded to India and Sheikh Abdullah became the Prime Minister of the state, the post which existed only in this state and later on it was converted to the post of chief minister. He started wavering on the issue of Jammu and Kashmir's accession to India. He formed the Plebiscite Front, which provoked the central government to depose and imprison him from 1953 till 1964.

There have been demands for autonomy within the state of Jammu and Kashmir from two regions – Jammu and the Ladakh, where the non-Kashmiris form substantial part of the population. The state of Jammu and Kashmir has also joined other states for the regional autonomy in terms of the change in the centre-state relations. The state has witnessed the insurgency since 1980s which resulted in the large scale violence and communal divide in the state. The involvement of Pakistan in the insurgency has posed the challenge to the Indian Nation-state. According to Balraj Puri, the reasons for the insurgency in the Jammu and Kashmir are: attitude of the central government, the lack of opposition in the state, derailment of democracy by the state and central leadership, rising unemployment and problems of the people, and the Cold War and Pakistan. In his opinion though the causes of insurgency in the



state have been existing from 1947 itself, its recent phase which started from 1986 does not have links with the earlier period. The central government curtailed the autonomy granted to the state in 1947; through the Constitutional Amendment, it made Articles 356 and 357 applicable to the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The central government as well as Sheikh Abdullah did not let the opposition grow in the state; the democracy was derailed in the name of nationalism; the interference of the central government in the affairs of the state and the unprincipled stance of the state government. These factors bred the feelings of helplessness among the people of Jammu and Kashmir. It coincided with the rising unemployment and deterioration in the material conditions of the people. At the same time refusal to grant autonomy within the state to the regions of Jammu and Ladakh engendered regional divide within the state. The void created by the absence of democratic opposition, political parties was filled up by the communal and fundamentalist forces. Encouraged and abated by Pakistan, these forces became the sources of insurgency in the state. The government's failure to find the solution which could integrate the people of Jammu and Kashmir emotionally to the nation-state, and instead relying on the armed forces has aggravated the problem.

---

## 26.7 SUMMARY

---

To sum up, ethnicity is one of the challenges which the Indian nation-state faces. It is manifested in the form of the self-determination movements – the autonomy movements, secessionist movements, insurgency and ethnic conflicts and riots. In an attempt to build the nation-state, the national leadership in the country in the first two decades following independence believed that the overall development/modernisation of the country would result in subordinating the ethnic challenge. It introduced the Nehruvian/Mahalanobis model for building the nation-state. But within a few years of independence, the country was engulfed in the linguistic agitations and communal violence. The model of nation-state building was contested by the smaller nationalities in various parts of the country – Nagas and Mizos in the North-East, Dravidan movement in Tamil Nadu, Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab. The number of ethnic conflicts continue to grow in the country.

There are mainly three sets of explanation for the rise of ethnic challenge to the nation-state – the primordial, the instrumental and a combination of the primordial and the instrumental. The instrumental explanation is the most predominant. It has been argued by some scholars that the nation-state building model is an attempt of the dominant leadership in the country to subordinate the smaller nationalities. To retrieve the situation, there has to be a reversal in the policies from the "nation-state building" to "genuine federation-building",

---

## 26.8 EXERCISES

---

- 4) What is ethnicity? Discuss the perspectives to study it.
- 5) Identify the forms of manifestation of ethnicity. Compare the challenge of ethnicity to the nation-state in Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir.
- 6) Examine the ethnicity in the context of North-East India.
- 7) Write a note on the ethnic challenge to the nation-state with the example of Tamil Nadu.