

Conceptualization of Ethnicity and Identity Formation

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Abstract - This paper discusses the theoretical background of ethnicity and its role in identity formation. The resurgence of ethnicity in the contemporary world has inevitably led to a critical re-examination of widely popular assumptions that surrounded the study of ethnic group and ethnic consciousness. The contemporary world is characterized by a profound ethnic assertiveness rather than decline. This study is a modest attempt at understanding the ethnicisation of Kashmiri identity which has fractured the earlier composite culture of the Kashmir. What “kashmiriyat” actually stands for and also what is the role of territorial homogenization in sharpening the ethnic lines in Kashmir. Ethnic consciousness works as glue for the group members but it also leads to resistance for the outer elements, infringement of any sort becomes intolerant. Instrumentalist view regards ethnic identity as a tool, one that can be mobilized or manipulated to achieve specific ends usually in the fields of politics and the economy. In this study we will observe its relevance with the Kashmiri society.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Identity formation, Primordial Approach, Instrumental Approach, Kashmiri Society

I. ETHNIC PHENOMENON

Ethnicity has become one of the concepts mostly debated in both academic and the media from last three decades. There is a profusion of assumptions, prepositions or hypothesis related to the ethnic phenomena that range from middle level to grandiose and from commonsensical to contradictory (John L. 1987, p. 301). A major element in the confusion and conflict surrounding the field of ‘ethnic phenomena’ has been the failure to find any measure of agreement about what the central concepts of ethnicity signify or how they should be used.

There are several elements that contribute to this confusion. One is the widespread assumption that ethnic groups or communities are necessarily ‘part of a larger society’. This is very much the American sociological tradition that Richard Schermerhorn’s definition and approach exemplify. It is a tradition that does not question the relationship between ethnic groups and nations, but assumes rather that ethnic groups are always minorities within a nation or nation state (Hutchinson and Smith 1996, p.15).

To start at the etymological level, the word ethnic has roots in the Greek word *ethnikos* the adjective of the word *ethnos* which means ‘a people or a nation (Cashmore 2002, p. 85).’ But while the Greek usage tended to refer only to foreigners or the peripheral as *ethnos*, current usage has steadily and sometimes even grudgingly begun to label even

majority or native population as ethnic. ‘Ethnic Identity and ‘Ethnic Origin’ refer to the individual level of identification with a culturally defined collectivity, the sense on the part of the individual that she or he belongs to a particular cultural community. ‘Ethnic Origin’ likewise refers to a sense of ancestry and nativity on the part of the individual through his or her parents and grandparents; although the concept may also have an even more problematic collective dimension, referring to the (usually diverse) cultural groups and migration origins of ethnics (Hutchinson and Smith 1996, pp. 4-5).

Kashmiri as an ethnic group can be defined as a historically formed aggregate of people having a real or imaginary association with a specified territory, a shared cluster of beliefs and values connoting its distinctiveness in relation to similar groups and recognized as such by others.

Though the term ‘ethnicity is recent; the sense of kinship, group solidarity, and common culture to which it refers is as old as the historical record. Ethnic communities have been present in every period and continent and have played an important role in all societies. Though their salience and impact have varied considerably, they have always constituted one of the basic modes of human association and community. The same is true of the sense of ethnic identity. Though more elusive, the sense of a common ethnicity has remained to this day a major focus of identification by individuals (Hutchinson and Smith 1996, p. 3).

II. INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades ethnicity has emerged as a key concept in the writings of numerous social scientists. Societal developments which once may have been explained by economic, political and social factors are increasingly viewed as manifestations of ethnicity. A host of social phenomena around the world is seen to represent the ever growing repertoire of ethnicity to the extent that today we see an entire “industry” devoted to the service of this concept: academic journals, university departments, television channels and government departments in some countries. ‘Settler’ societies have even adopted it as part of their political culture (like the state ideology of multiculturalism in Australia and Canada) (Devalle 1992, pp.25-26). Given the fact that ethnicity continues to be the dominant social force operational in more or less every society: the sociological relevance of this problem can hardly be overestimated. The cultural divisions of the state

of J&K include Dugar, Ladakh, Baltistan, Gilgit (land of the Dards), Mirpur-Poonch-Muzaffarabad and the Valley of Kashmir (Koul 1972).

Ancient Kashmir was a meeting point for people from a variety of cultures such as the western Greco-Roman, Iranian, eastern Mongolian and Indo-Aryans. But it was home for 'Indians' or 'Indo-Aryans' (Koul 1972). As the economic structure started to collapse, internal tensions fumed, the Indo-Aryan polity weakened and made the region vulnerable to foreign conquests. Dynasties rose to power and fell. Uprisings against oppressors sprung up. Military leaders and adventurers exploited the uprisings to their benefits. Kashmir became a land for insurrections. Still, Kashmir was strong enough to resist even the great conqueror, *Mahmood of Ghazni*. After the rule of the sultans, Kashmir was ruled by Mughals of India (1586-1753), then Afghans (1753-1819), Sikhs (1819-1846) and the Dogras of Jammu with British residency (1846-1947) (Pacholczyk, 1978, pp.1-16). In 1947, India got partitioned. The state of Jammu and Kashmir (together with Ladakh) acceded to India and another part, Mirpur-Poonch-Muzaffarabad-Poonch acceded to Pakistan, since then, Kashmir barely saw peace. The region termed 'Azad Kashmir' is the one administered by Pakistan and was freed from India since the first Indo-Pak war of 1947-8 by the help of the Pakistan Army and the rebelling militias aided by Pakistan.

There are broadly two approaches which enable us to explain the persistence of ethnicity even in the context of Kashmiri society. They are primordial and instrumental (also referred to as 'circumstantial approaches') (Banks 1996, p. 39).

III. THE PRIMORDIAL APPROACH

To begin with, the primordialists have culture as their major focus. To them ethnic identities are not 'chosen', they are given i.e., they proceed inexorably from the cultural given of the past (Urmila Phadnis 1989, p.16). The primordialists stress the ascriptive nature of ethnic identity and highlight the emotional and kinship links in group formation. They generally believe, as did Harold Isaacs, that ethnicity is a basic given, a natural attachment and not an identity that is in any way chosen from a whole range of identities (Gopa Sabharwal, 2006 p.13). In 'Basic Group Identity: The Idols of the Tribe', Harold Isaacs states that 'basic group identity consists of the readymade set of endowments and identifications which every individual shares with others for the moment of birth by chance of the family into which he is born at that given time in that given place' (Isaacs 1975, P.31).

Those who stress the presence of strong primordial ties believe that ethnicity is a universal given and is as deep-rooted as say speech or kinship. People recognize the subjective bonds that unite them into an ethnic group. These bonds are based on the assumed 'givens' of social existence such as contiguity and kin connections (Geertz 1996, P. 42).

The person who is most clearly identified with primordialism is Clifford Geertz. Geertz says that ethnicity is 'primordial' and defines primordial attachment as "one, that stems from the 'givens' of existence, or, more precisely, since culture is inevitably involved in such matters, the assumed 'givens' of social existence, immediate contiguity and live connections mainly, but beyond them the governess that stems from being born into a particular religious' community, speaking a particular language or even dialect of a language, and following particular social practices. These contiguities of blood, speech, custom and so on are seen to have an ineffable, and at times, overpowering, coerciveness in and of themselves. One is bound to one's kinsman, one's neighbor, one's fellow believer, ipso facto, as a result not merely of personal moral obligation, but at least in great part, by virtue of some unaccountable import attributed to the very tie itself" (Kumar 2006, P.64).

Edward Shils seems to be one of the first to employ the term primordial, in reference to relationship within the family. In his view, the relational attachment to a kin member is not merely to the other family member as a person, but as a possessor of certain especially significant relational qualities, which could only be described as 'primordial'. This attachment is not cemented through interaction: rather, it derives its strength from 'a certain ineffable significance-attributed to the tie of blood' (Kumar 2006, P. 63).

Another proponent of the primordialist model is Joshua Fishman. In an essay entitled "Social Theory and Ethnography," he says: "Ethnicity has always been experienced as a kinship phenomenon, continuity within the self and within those who share an intergenerational link to common ancestors. Ethnicity is partly experienced as being "bone of their bone, flesh of their flesh, and blood of their blood". The human body itself is viewed as an expression of ethnicity, and ethnicity is commonly felt to be in blood, bones, and flesh. It is crucial that we recognize ethnicity as a tangible, living reality that makes every human a link in an eternal bond from generation to generation- from past ancestors to those in future, "ethnicity is experienced as a guarantor of eternity" (Fishman 1980, pp.84-97).

Primordality according to Eller and Coughlan is 'essentially a question of emotion or affect'. Nothing could be less true. The term refers to a particular pattern of orientation of human society. One element of any orientation is its cognitive referent. This was understandably taken for granted by Shils in his article, 'primordial, personal, sacred, and civil ties' (Hutchinson and Smith 1996, p. 54). The position taken by Bromley and his colleagues is strongly primordialist though they recognize the importance of specific historical, economic and political factors in shaping the expression of ethnic identity. While not 'external' (Bromley, 1974, p.61), the expression of ethnic identity is so strongly resilient that it persists through generations and through a variety of social forms. But there is a critique of this theory as well in the form of Instrumental approach.

IV. THE INSTRUMENTAL APPROACH

The instrumental or the circumstantial approach holds that ethnicity is an artifact, created by individuals or groups to bring together a group of people for some common purpose. It is used as an instrument to mobilize the members of a group to achieve socio-economic and political objectives (Kumar 2006, p. 68). Fredrick Barth's edited book '*Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*' proved to be enormously influential in shaping the ideas about ethnic groups. The whole burden of his argument is that an ethnic group needs to be understood not in terms of the objective features such as dress, language etc. its members share but in terms of boundaries they form. He makes two significant points.

1. First, the group may lose some of these features and acquire new ones over a period of time but the boundaries still exist despite a flow of personnel and information across them.
2. Secondly and as a corollary to the first, that group cannot exist in isolation but only in contrast to other such groups. That is, the boundary does not bind 'something off from nothingness, but rather it distinguishes between two (or more) "something"(Barth (eds.), 1969,pp. 14-15).In the circumstantialist approach, Barth emphasizes how ethnic boundary markers such as language, clothing, or other cultural traits are not based on deeply rooted, enduring aspects of ethnicity. Ethnic boundaries are continually being revised, negotiated, and redefined according to the practical interests of actors. Ethnic boundaries are generated by the varying contexts and circumstances in which people find themselves (Scupin, Decorse 2005, p. 580).

One of the most pronouncedly instrumentalist positions has been taken by Abner Cohen. The whole burden of Cohen's argument presented in his '*Custom and Politics in Urban Africa*' (1969) is that ethnicity is instrumental, that is, the reasons for the assertion of an ethnic identity by a group are essentially economic and political rather than psychological. Thus his position is clearly anti primordialist (Kumar 2006, p. 69). Gellner expresses the instrumentalist view of artificiality of the nationalism with his famous quotations, "nationalism...invents nations", and "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist" (Gellner 1964, p.168). Michael Hector views the growth of ethnic solidarity among the people Celtic Fringe of Great Britain as a response to economic, political and cultural marginalization. He notes: "the spatially uneven wave of modernization over state territory creates relatively advanced and less advanced groups. As a consequence of this initial fortuitous distribution of resources and power between the two groups, the super-ordinate group, or the core, seeks to stabilize and monopolize its advantages through policies aiming at the institutionalization of the existing stratification system"(Hector 1975, p.9). Insurgency versus military

control by the Indian Army has taken its toll on the people of Kashmir who continue to suffer from state sponsored torture. Sumit Ganguly (1996) has explained the Kashmir insurgency as an outcome of the juxtaposition of 'political mobilization' and 'institutional decay'. According to him, although political mobilization in Kashmir started much later than the rest of India, institutional decay began as early as 1950s in Kashmir (earlier than rest of India). As political mobilization accelerated drastically in the 1970s, increased political awareness of the newly emerged Kashmiri youth resulted in greater sensitivity to ethnic discrimination. On the one hand, developmental policies in India created politically conscious Kashmiri youth, and on the other hand, government suppressing political participation gave rise to more political dissent and resulted in parallel political platforms (Ganguly 1996, pp. 76-107).

Paul Brass (1991) argues that ethnicity and nationalism are not 'given' but social and political constructions. They have become major forces shaping the modern world and structure and stability of contemporary states. They arise under particular circumstances and he has tried to identify those circumstances which give rise to ethnicity and nationalism. One of such situations is the one in which there is competition between elites of the dominant groups and those of the non-dominant groups and between the state and elites. The modern democratic framework provides ample opportunities for groups aspiring to go up the political ladder provided they are able to organize themselves better. Elites of the non-dominant groups tend to harp on the cultural forms, values, practices of their groups to mobilize the members of their groups thereby strengthening their political base. He takes pains to emphasise the fact that his understanding of ethnicity comes closer to the 'instrumentalist' rather than 'primordialist' view of ethnicity (Kumar 2006, pp. 77-78).

Anthony d. smith (1984) takes the position that the two approaches primordial and instrumental should not be mutually exclusive and indeed, in concrete behavioral contexts one might find both cultural and strategic elements at play.

Referring specifically to the context of nationalism, Smith notes: 'we find that ethnic and national phenomena take so many forms and appear in so many milieu that neither a "Heraclitan" approach which regards them as completely malleable and subject to external flux, nor a 'Paridean' standpoint that would view them as forever fixed and immutable, can do justice to their variety and complexity"(Kumar 2006, p 74).The above bodies of theories are largely relevant to the various socio-cultural changes of Kashmir.

V. ETHNICITY AND COTEMPORARY WORLD

Ethnicity in contrast, is not always a political ideology or a political -programme. It is a lived identity which is rooted in the particular life history of the group concerned. Ethnicity

is a sociological construct that may acquire political functions or be linked to nationalist politics but ethnic nationalism is only one kind of ethnic mobilization (Sabharwal, 2006, p. 15).

The term ethnicity was first used by David Riessman in 1953 (Glazer, Moynihan (eds.), 1976, p. 1). Spoonley has suggested ethnicity "To acknowledge the positive feelings of belonging to a cultural group" (Spoonley, 1988, p. 32). However, in more recent years ethnicity became a crucial concept to analyze some of the 'negative' trends. The notion of 'ethnic cleansing' in the former Yugoslavia brought the very idea of ethnicity into political disrepute. However much a sense of shared ethnicity created positive feelings of belonging to an in-group, it seemed to imply total hostility and genocide towards neighboring out groups (Kumar, 2006, p. 43). According to Fredrik Barth (1969), ethnicity can be said to exist when people claim a certain ethnic identity for themselves and are defined by others as having that identity. Members of an ethnic group may define themselves or be defined by others as different and special because of their language, religion, geography, history, ancestry, or physical traits. When an ethnic group is assumed to have a biological basis (shared 'blood' or genetic material), it is called a race. Today people think that "ethnic group" and "ethnicity" are just politically correct ways of talking about race. That's not so. Ethnicity is based on common cultural traditions not only on assumed biological traits, as race is (Kottak 2004, p. 367). As Glazer and Moynihan, foremost writer on ethnicity describes ethnic group as 'all the groups of a society characterized by distinct sense of difference owing to culture and descent' (Glazer, Moynihan (eds.) 1975, p. 4). There has also been a debate regarding the status of ethnic groups. More often than not, an ethnic group has been viewed as a substitute for a minority (Schaefer 1979, p. 4).

The refutation of such a restrictive use of the term has come from social scientists of various ideological persuasions who rightly argue that it is neither size nor status but the group distinctiveness or the subjective-objective criteria that is the critical factor in ethnic group identification (Moynihan, Glazer 1974, pp. 9-10). A quick look at the contemporary world would tell us a story. It is a story more about the triumph of identity than about that of reason. It is a story about the irrepressible search for identity. Even in the face of modernization. People are willing to die for their identity. The power of reason has clearly collapsed before the power of identity (Kumar 2006, p. 4).

The resurgence of ethnicity in the contemporary world has inevitably led to a critical re-examination of widely popular assumptions that surrounded the study of ethnic group and ethnic consciousness. These assumptions pervaded the writings of scholars owing allegiance to different theoretical perspectives and ideological convictions. One of the popular assumptions shared by Marxists is that ethnicity is a remnant of a pre-socialist evolution; with class consciousness deemed the only legitimate basis of group's identity or solidarity. With the growth of radical class

consciousness which is taken as an illustration of oblivion. Classes would replace ethnic groups in an increasingly modern world. Similarly it has also been argued by others that with the inexorable process of modernization and rationalization, it is only a matter of time before ethnic groups would become a thing of past. The growing rationality and scientific temper would strike at the very root of ethnic Consciousness. The privileging of reason in the modern world would lead to the destruction of so called traditional social bonds, feelings, customs and beliefs. However, contrary to the above one is struck by the growing salience of ethnicity. The contemporary world is characterized by a profound ethnic assertiveness rather than decline. One could rationalize it in terms of inadequate or lack of modernization in the case of so-called 'traditional' societies. For example, in the post independent India, there have been several instances of ethnic assertiveness (Kumar 2006, pp. 1-2). In other words ethnicity may be seen as a legitimate child of modernity rather than its negation (Kumar 2006, p. 55).

Thus, progress in science and technology, uneven development in socio- economic spheres, demographic changes, intended or unintended consequences of the participatory turned plebiscitary electoral political system, sequence of widening of communication networks are some of the factors which have tended to be the catalysts of the processes of social change, though in varying degrees. These processes have affected the normative order of the existing social frame work by questioning at times its stratificatory order and generating in the process social tensions with ethnic conflict being one of its many manifestations. Striving for equity and achievement, its individualistic claims are aggregated on a collective basis (Phadnis 1989, pp. 26-27).

Multi- ethnicity is a socio- political phenomenon in most civic societies and in the present century inter-ethnic mobilization has posed varied challenges to many 'developed' or 'developing' states (Phadnis 1989, p. 11). "Brass" says, 'ethnicity is to ethnic category what class consciousness is to class (Kumar, 2006, p. 48). There may be a high correlation between ethnicity and class, which means that there is a high likelihood that persons belonging to specific ethnic group also belong to specific social class. There can be a significant interrelationship between class and ethnicity, both class and ethnicity can be criteria for rank, and ethnic membership can be an important factor in class membership. Both class differences and ethnic differences can be pervasive features of societies, but they are not one and the same thing and must be distinguished from one another analytically (Hutchinson, Smith 1996, pp. 30-31).

Individuals who are members of group that suffers inferior social status or caste develop weaker identity. Racial and ethnic minorities are the best examples of this. Members of ethnic minorities usually find themselves in complex network of social relationship, within which they try to

define their social identity (Suri 1994, p. 7). The closer a person comes to having to construe him in a new and alien manner the more he is likely to feel threatened (Coy 1977, pp. 27-28). Many different dimensions, e.g. race, ethnicity, religion, have been employed to distinguish minority from majority. But as Noel (1968) argues, in “the origin of ethnic stratification” that the differences along these dimensions do not automatically generate conflict and create a system of ethnic inequality. Majority-minority relations do not appear until one group successfully imposes its will upon another (Suri 1994, p. 8).

VI. CONCLUSION

While discussing the approaches, related to ethnicity in shaping the identity of society, both the approaches show a fine relation with the Kashmiri society. Valley Kashmir is cutoff by the mountains from the rest of the country. For that matter the term ‘ethnoscape’, introduced to the academic world by Arjun Appadurai is useful in examining the linkage between ethnic perceptions and space. Kashmir being isolated and alienated state it is evident that Ethnic “ties” are inherent in us as human beings: that we have deep, ‘natural’, connections that link us to some people and that leads to natural divisions with others, whether based on race, religion, language or location. Thus division caused natural “ties” has been referred to as ‘ancient hatreds’. At the same time Kashmir issue is a political issue it will be resolved through dialogue only. Stakeholders of valley need to come on conscience at certain fronts. But instead of resolution what kind of politics is being played is not hidden from the eyes of intellectuals. The closely connected instrumentalist view regards ethnic identity as a tool, can be really justified in through Kashmiri society.

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