

Ethnicity as wellspring of identity, group consciousness and a widget to conflict

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Abstract

The paper is theoretical in nature and the data for the same has been collected from various secondary sources. A serious and prevailing challenge to international security at present times is that of "Ethnic Conflict". If they are left unchecked, they may pose a serious threat to the structure of society in which they occur. This paper tries to give a sincere effort to understand ethnicity from various perspectives given by various theorists from time to time and also it tries to explain how ethnicity helps in categorization of people by defining them as 'in group' and 'out group' based on the group membership, which in turn tries to give a source to generate ethnic consciousness between various group members. At last paper tries to depict various sources that generate conflict between various groups based on ethnic terms. It is noteworthy that, every conflict has not the same intensity and consequences worldwide. They differ from place to place and region to region. People are tortured, Killed, maimed, raped. The importance of ethnic conflict, as a force shaping human affairs, as a phenomenon to be understood, as a threat to be controlled, can no longer be denied. By one reckoning, ethnic violence since World War II has claimed more than ten million lives.

Keywords: ethnicity, group identity, individuation, imagined consciousness, ethnic consciousness, prejudice, ethnic conflict

Introduction

The concept of ethnicity has been used by social scientists differently. Ethnicity seems to be a new term (Glazer & Moynihan, 1975, p. 1) ^[16]. "One senses a term still on the move (Epstein, Ethos and Identity: Three Studies in Ethnicity, 1978, p. 92) ^[7, 14]. Furthermore, there has been a strong and sudden increment in propensities by individuals in numerous nations and in various circumstances to demand the essentialness of their group identity and distinctiveness and on new rights that derive from this group character.

Whereas, the term 'ethnicity' is new, the word 'ethnic' is much older. It is derived from the Greek 'ethnos' (which in turn is derived from *ethnikos*), which originally meant Heathen or Pagan¹ (Eriksen, 2010, pp. 4-5) ^[15]. It was used in this sense in English from the mid 14th century until the mid 19th century, when it gradually turns to be racial term. None of the establishing fathers of sociology and anthropology contributed much to the term-with the exceptional case of Weber-who conceded it much consideration and characterized it as, "those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists"(Malesevic, 2004, p. 25) ^[21]. So what is important here, first ethnicity exists just on the premise of specific group belief. Consequently, if there is no common group belief there is no ethnic group. Secondly, Ethnicity is based in a single but strong belief i.e. belief in common line of descent. At last in spite of the fact that the faith in common lineage is putative, it is fortified and made to accept on the

grounds of physical and social comparability or on the premise of shared history and memory.

Manning Nash in order to define ethnic groups has suggested the metaphor of '*bed, blood and cult*'. By providing this metaphor he defines an ethnic group as, "biologically self-perpetuating and endogamous, that they have an ideology of shared ancestry, and that they have a shared religion" (Eriksen, 2010, pp. 41-42) ^[15].

For Fredrick Brath, "a categorical ascription is an ethnic ascription when it classifies a person in terms of his basic, most general identity, in a presumed manner determined by his origin and background. To the extent that actors use ethnic identities to categorize themselves and others for purpose of interaction, they form ethnic groups in the organizational sense. Furth he says that ethnic groups are seen as a form of social organization (Barth, 1996, pp. 75-82) ^[2].

Ethnicity is a sense of Ethnic Identity which is further defined by De Vos as, "consisting of the 'subjective, symbolic or emblematic use' by a 'group of People...of any aspect of culture, in order to differentiate themselves from other groups"(Brass, 1996, pp. 85-86) ^[3] Identity is what people perceive and experience. Calhoun writes, "We know of no people without names, no language or cultures in which some manner of distinction between self and other, we and they, are not made(Castells, 2010, p. 6) ^[5]. For Giddens identity are "sources of meaning for the actors themselves, constructed through a process of individuation". Manuell castells believes that, identities can also be finding their origin from dominant institutions of the society. They become identities only after individuals internalize them and build their meaning around their internalization (Castells, 2010, p. 7) ^[5]. Whereas for Erik Erikson; identity construction always involves an interaction between externals internal factors (Epstein, Ethos and Identity, 1978, p. Xii) ^[6, 7].

¹That is non-Hellenic and, later, non-Jewish (Gentile) or non-Christian, second-class peoples, Source: Malesevic, S. (2004). *The Sociology of Ethnicity*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications: p. 1

According to Donald L Horowitz, "Membership in an ethnic group is a matter of social definition, an interplay of the self-definition of members and the definition of other groups". According to him one acquires Ethnic identity at time of birth (Horowitz, 1975, p. 113) ^[18]. Fredrick Barth in his work, 'Ethnic Groups and Boundaries' says that, "A categorical ascription is an ethnic ascription when it classifies a person in terms of his basic, most general identity, presumably determined by his origin and background. To the extent that actors use ethnic identities to categorize themselves and others for purposes of interaction, they form ethnic groups in this organizational sense (Barth, 1996, p. 78) ^[2]. By this categorization of people in group and out group people on the basis of group membership can be depicted. He asserts that the system of identification i.e. strangers or members is based on "boundaries" and the understanding between members which govern their relationship.

From last two centuries, we have seen a new phenomenon emerging which started from the west and reached to other parts of the world is of "politicizing ethnicity" or giving ethnicity a political nature, which transforms Ethnic identity to "Ethnic Consciousness". Ethnic consciousness arises out of similarity which leads to common political beliefs and action.

For Benedict Anderson, "ethnic consciousness is a false consciousness" (Anderson, 2006) ^[1]. He considers them as "imagined communities" which are defined ideologically. But it is because of this Identity, individual is acknowledged to be a member of a particular society.

A serious and prevailing challenge to international security at present times is that of "Ethnic Conflict". If they are left unchecked, they may pose a serious threat to the structure of society in which they occur. It is noteworthy that, every conflict has not the same intensity and consequences worldwide. They differ from place to place and region to region. But, they have one common feature everywhere i.e. Human misery they create: People are tortured, Killed, maimed, raped. It remains the task of social scientists to study conflicts of such nature. While we may not be in a position to stop those conflicts but a proper understanding of them will enhance our potential to lessen the intensity of human sufferings (Wolff, 2011, p. 1) ^[20, 22].

According to data provided by Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), every conflict is not an Ethnic conflict. It says that out of 174 international and national conflicts from year 1946 to 2008, only 90 were those which were Ethnic in nature, 65 were those based on territorial control (Wolff, 2011, p. 2) ^[20, 22]. Yet one thing is clear that, it seems unlikely that we will see a complete disappearance of conflicts of such nature in near future.

"Ethnic conflict" is a term loaded with often legitimate negative association and entirely unnecessary confusions (Wolff, 2011, p. 3) ^[20, 22]. One such confusion is that Ethnic conflicts are about Ethnicity. The term is also used loosely to describe intrastate conflicts that are not primarily ethnic in character (Guibernau & Rex, 1997, p. 81). For example the Conflict in Somalia which is Ethnically homogenous country in Africa is not an Ethnic conflict. Rather the conflict is actually between rival gangs, warlords and clans who belong to the same ethnic group. By conflict it means, "A situation in which two or more actors pursue incompatible, yet from their individual perspective entirely just, goals" (Wolff, 2011, p. 4)

^[20, 22]. "Ethnic conflict" is one of these conflicts, in which the goals of at least one party involved in conflict is based on ethnic terms and the reason for confronting one another is based on Ethnic distinctions.

There may be various kinds of reasons responsible for conflict between the parties but at least one party among the conflict party may show his disappointment in ethnic terms. For example, one party in the conflict will make 'Ethnic Identity' as a tool of showing their dissatisfaction for not getting representation at local levels and this will become a reason to conflict between ethnic groups. Ethnic Identities have existed throughout recorded history (Kaufman, Ethnicity as a generator of conflict, 2011, p. 91). Babylonians, Hebrews and Egyptians were the ancient ethnic groups just like contemporary ethnic groups of Kurds and Serbs. These groups have competing interests and these differences lead to ethnic conflict among them. Sometimes such conflicts have intense nature and sometimes they are resolved amicably. But, when the nature of conflict is political, they lead to violent clashes among groups that may sometimes result in civil wars, riots and sometimes genocide. Anthropologists believe that the ethnic identity has an 'ascribed nature' and this identity is difficult to change. In theory, a person can change his religion or sect but this achieved identity is not always entertained by his/her new co-ethnics. Identity in such cases is immutable. On the other hand, groups work hard to make their identity sticky and to do sometimes the group members do body tattooing and circumcision. Further identities sometimes do change. For example, 'Yugoslav' identity in Yugoslavia country disappeared with the death of Yugoslavia in 1991, so the natives of the group who were previously identified as 'Yugoslavs' shifted to another identity like Croats, Serbs or to some other group.

Conflict and its sources

There is a continuous disagreement among various schools of thought regarding the sources of Ethnic conflict. 'Psychological' school of thought believes that ethnic conflict is very real and they stem out from basic ethnic identities, primarily by desire to 'material goods'. On the other hand, 'Instrumentalist' school of thought doesn't believe in the existence of ethnic conflict & they believe that the ethnic identity is used as a tool by some elites to pursue their economic goals. This view holds a strong belief that the leaders involved can only be blamed, who misdirect their people for their selfish interests (Kaufman, Ethnicity as a generator of conflict, 2011, p. 92).

Michael E. Brown has given two criteria for the beginning of an ethnic conflict: - The first criterion is that two or more ethnic groups must reside in close proximity; second, national, regional and international authorities must be too weak to ensure the security of individual groups (Brown, 1997, pp. 81-100) ^[4].

Michael E. Brown defines it as, an 'Ethnic conflict' is a dispute about important political, economic, social, cultural or territorial issues between two or more ethnic communities" (Brown, 1997, p. 82) ^[4].

De Nevers argues that the group size is also the factor responsible for Ethnic conflict. If one group is larger than the other he will be able to dominate the discussions and minorities will feel alienated (Brown, 1997, p. 86) ^[4].

Emergence of 'ethnic nationalism' is always seen as a threat by others which may flare up in the form of ethnic conflict. The growth of these sentiments will always lead to the development of similar feelings in another group. This will raise the pitch of minorities who will demand for separate states.

Religion is considered as an important factor for ethnic conflict and the same is revealed by a study which reflects that near about three quarters of the conflicts since year 1960 have a religious component (Bruce:2003) and are involved in order to justify the cause of conflict. Without feelings of antipathy, there can be no ethnic conflict.

More than these factors there are other factors that help in escalating 'ethnic war', they are: 'Fears', that are anxiety laden, 'Prejudice', we are made to like or dislike other groups because we have developed a negative stereotype like that. "Emotional feelings about other groups are even more important than cognitively based stereotypes in explaining prejudice", 'Political space', in which people are allowed to mobilize politically without any coercion from the state, 'Rational Grievances', discontent with policies of language, economic distribution, religion etc. However, none of these types of grievances is sufficient for the outbreak of ethnic war. It is rather psychology of anger which motivates groups for ethnic war (Kaufman, Ethnic Fears and Ethnic War in Karabagh, 1998, pp. 4-9)^[19]

The role of ethnicity that it plays can be violent and non-violent ethnic conflicts. It is wrong to say that Ethnicity itself is a generator of conflict. Groups or individuals will not enter into a conflict only because they believe they belong to different ethnic identities. Street gang members who are defined ethnically will not attack other gang members on the belief that they are of different ethnic groups but most often they will attack for "defending their turf" (Kaufman, Ethnicity as a generator of conflict, 2011, p. 94)

Differences in language policy and hence the disagreement by minority groups in a multi-ethnic nations can play a fatal role for the integrity of that nation. Minorities will feel less representation and less benefited. For instance, recent example of 2015 Naib Tehsildar Exam in J&K, in which Urdu was a descriptive paper to be qualified by all has sent a great resentment among non-natives or Hindi speakers of Jammu region.

Religious differences and sects in various ethnic groups of a heterogeneous country is another source leading to ethnic conflict. Those who strongly believe that there is the faith only which stands true, they may give official status to their belief or faith and start imposing restrictions on other groups. Such things are common in Muslim-majority countries with some exceptions like Uzbekistan (Kaufman, Ethnicity as a generator of conflict, 2011, p. 95)

Ethnicity generates conflict in many different ways. The question rises in our mind that, what these ethnic conflicts aim for? The answer is that because the group wants dominance, regional autonomy or political power over others. When 'group dominance' and 'myth-symbol complex' becomes a desire, they encourage hostility among groups, non-violent ethnic conflicts will transfer to violent ones (Kaufman, Ethnicity as a generator of conflict, 2011, p. 100). As said earlier, a better understanding of these types of conflicts will help in lessening the intensity of such conflicts. Donald Horowitz in his book "Ethnic groups in conflict" says

that, "The importance of ethnic conflict, as a force shaping human affairs, as a phenomenon to be understood, as a threat to be controlled, can no longer be denied. By one reckoning, ethnic violence since World War II has claimed more than ten million lives.

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