
UNIT 34 ETHNIC RELATIONS AND CONFLICTS

Structure

- 34.0 Objectives
- 34.1 Introduction
- 34.2 Concepts Associated with Ethnic Relations
 - 34.2.1 Ethnic and Ethnic Group
 - 34.2.2 Ethnicity
 - 34.2.3 Ethnic Identity
 - 34.2.4 Ethnic Boundary
 - 34.2.5 Majority and Minority Groups
 - 34.2.6 Conversions
- 34.3 Widespread Interest in and Basic Approaches to the Study of Ethnic Relations
 - 34.3.1 Factors Associated with the Widespread Interest
 - 34.3.2 Basic Approaches
- 34.4 Dimensions of Ethnic Relations in India
 - 34.4.1 Language and Region
 - 34.4.2 Religion
 - 34.4.3 Caste
- 34.5 Role of the British Administration and the Constitution of India in Relation to Ethnic Groups
 - 34.5.1 British Administration
 - 34.5.2 Constitution of India
- 34.6 Ethnic Conflicts in India
 - 34.6.1 Language Conflict
 - 34.6.2 Religious Conflict
 - 34.6.3 Common Features of Ethnic Conflicts
- 34.7 Solutions to the Problem of Ethnic Conflicts
- 34.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 34.9 Key Words
- 34.10 Further Reading
- 34.11 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

34.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you should be able to

- define and clarify the concepts related to ethnic relations
- state the factors associated with the spurt in the interest on ethnic relations
- describe the basic approaches to the study of ethnic relations
- list and explain the major premises on which ethnicity operates in India

- state the position of the British administration and the Constitution of Independent India toward ethnic groups
- describe the types of ethnic conflicts found in India
- state the measures suggested to tackle the problems of ethnic conflicts.

34.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Block of ESO-12 we looked into the role and status of women in India. We also examined some contemporary issues relating to women's status. In this unit, we are going to describe ethnic relations and ethnic conflicts in India. We will begin our description with definition and clarification of concepts associated with ethnic relations. The concepts defined are ethnic, ethnic groups, ethnicity, ethnic identity, ethnic boundary, majority and minority groups and conversions. We will then proceed to outline the major factors associated with the increasing and widespread focus on the issue of ethnic relations all over the world. We will also lay out the basic approaches in sociology to the study of ethnic relations. Then we shall turn our attention to ethnic relations in India. We will first describe the premises on which ethnicity operates in India. This will be followed by an observation of the role of the British administration and the Constitution of free India on ethnic relations in India. In our description of ethnic conflicts in India, we shall focus mainly on conflicts based on language and religion. We shall also summarise the main features exhibited by ethnic conflicts in India. This will be followed by a section on suggestions to solve the problem of ethnic conflicts in India.

34.2 CONCEPTS ASSOCIATED WITH ETHNIC RELATIONS

Across the world today, there is a serious and growing concern over the issue of ethnic relations and conflicts. India too shares this concern, as ethnic conflicts pose a serious problem in Indian society. Before we describe the nature of ethnic relations and conflicts in India, we must be clear in our minds as to what the term ethnic and other terms associated with ethnic relations mean. So our first task is one of definition and clarification of terms associated with ethnic relations. In this section we will define the following terms. (1) Ethnic and ethnic groups, (2) ethnicity, (3) ethnic identity, (4) ethnic boundary, (5) majority and minority groups, and (6) conversions.

34.2.1 Ethnic and Ethnic Group

The term 'ethnic' is derived from the Greek word 'ethno' meaning 'nation'. It was originally used to denote primitive tribes or societies that formed a nation on the basis of their simplistic forms of government and economy.

But sociologists and social anthropologists use the term ethnic in a wider sense, based on their studies of pre-colonial and plural societies. Their studies revealed the coexistence of many groups that can be termed 'ethnic' within a nation. So in the course of time, ethnic has come to mean that which pertains to a group of people who can be distinguished by certain features like race, language or any other aspect of culture.

Ethnic group, is, therefore, defined as a cultural group whose members either share some or all of the following features—a common language, region, religion, race, endogamy, customs and beliefs. Members may also share a belief in common descent. On the basis of this definition we may say that the Jews, Negroes, Japanese, Muslims, Biharis all form distinct ethnic groups. Ethnic group thus refers to a group of people who share some common physical and/or socio-cultural characteristics.

Here we may ask the question; why is it so important to understand the concept of ethnic groups in the context of our examination of ethnic relations? We may say it is important because ethnic group defines an individual's social personality. It is formed on the basis of cultural and racial uniformity. The essence of this group lies in the individual's feeling of belongingness to it because of cultural association shared with other members. Birth determines incorporation into these groups, thereby making membership relatively restrictive, however, exception to this rule exists, for instance, in the form of conversions. We shall talk about conversion later on in this section.

34.2.2 Ethnicity

Ethnicity refers to the interrelationships between ethnic groups. Thus the phenomenon of ethnicity becomes more pronounced when viewed at an interactional level. Cohen (1974) defines ethnicity as a process of “interaction between culture groups operating within common social contexts”. Though ethnicity is manifest in intra-ethnic relations, it becomes more apparent in inter-ethnic situations, as the very essence of ethnicity stems from the need to establish ethnic identity.

34.2.3 Ethnic Identity

Ethnic identity reflects both ‘likeness’ and ‘uniqueness’. On the one hand, it reflects on what the members of an ethnic group hold in common, at the same time differentiating them from other ethnic groups. The following is a diagrammatical representation of some of the factors of ethnic identification as arranged around the ‘self’.

NATIONALITY
LANGUAGE
RELIGION
REGION
RACE
CASTE
SELF

The order of arrangement may vary from one social context to another depending on the issue. Also some of these factors may vary in significance from society to society. For example, in India, caste happens to be an important form of ethnic identification but it is of no significance when studying a European community.

Activity 1

Go to any locality in the place where you live and find out the following information from at least 15 households.

- 1) Religion to which the members of the household belong
- 2) Language i.e., their mother tongue
- 3) Region and State to which they belong
- 4) The identity they value most
 - a) caste
 - b) religion
 - c) region/language or
 - d) any other
 - e) all of the above

Write a note of about two pages on “Ethnic Composition and Identification of a Group”. Compare, if possible, what you have written with those of other students at your Study Centre.

34.2.4 Ethnic Boundary

Ethnic boundary refers to a social boundary, which does not always correspond to territorial boundary. The individual defines one self through one’s ethnic identity whereas ethnic boundary defines the social limit of the ethnic group. A dichotomisation of “others” as strangers, as members of another ethnic group, has two implications:

- i) The recognition of one’s own social boundaries (in group and out group) and
- ii) The limitation of common understanding and mutual interest. People outside the boundary are not expected to have a common understanding and interest.

34.2.5 Majority and Minority Groups

The study of ethnic groups incorporates both the majority and the minority groups. The term ‘majority groups’ refer to the numerical representation of persons in a group and its control over economic and political resources. Usually it has been noticed that one ethnic group appears to be in dominance over other ethnic groups. However, we cannot overlook the internal disparities that exist within each ethnic group in terms of economic status. That is, certain sections in the minority group may enjoy majority status and vice-versa, in which the group may occupy either minority or majority status as a totality.

There exists a relationship of inequality between the majority and minority groups. The dominant group or the majority group enjoys numerical strength and control over economic and political resources. This group has all the privileges and advantages. The minority group on the other hand consists of

people who are immigrants to the host society. Their numerical strength is low and they are in a subordinate position to the majority group, in relation to control over the limited resources.

The co-relation between numerical strength and control over economic and political resources is a point of argument. As history provides many evidences of minority dominance over mass majority, for example, the British colonialism in India and the domination of a White minority on the Black majority in South Africa during the days of apartheid. In the 1980s we had the immigrant Bengali minority occupying higher offices in Assam. These instances reveal that the myth surrounding the 'minority group' concept, as being a group, which is subjected to dominance and inferior status because of its low numerical strength, is not true. As it is obvious that a group having control over political and economic resources irrespective of its numerical strength becomes a 'majority minority'.

34.2.6 Conversions

In the earlier subsection 34.2.1 we mentioned that membership into an ethnic group is primarily determined by birth, though conversions constitute an exception to this rule. Conversion, literally, means change into another form. The most popular example of conversion is religious conversion.

Conversions pose a problem in group-identification and boundary maintenance. That is, in situations, where members of one group have become members of another ethnic group there develops a problem regarding the allegiance of these converted members to either of these ethnic groups. The process of conversion has gone on for centuries. For instance, Hindus have converted themselves into either Islam or Christianity. Caste mobility has also taken place, whereby using a higher caste as their reference group, the lower castes have gradually claimed a higher caste status. Process of **miscegenation** has taken place, whereby children have been born from racial intermixture. These kind of conversions lead to a problem in the study of inter-ethnic relations. But in spite of these conversions ethnic groups still persist, as they are not affected by these changing loyalties.

Check Your Progress 1

i) Which of the following would you identify as ethnic groups?

Tick the right answers.

- a) Politicians
- b) Khasi
- c) Brahmin
- d) Girls
- e) Landlords
- f) Gujaratis
- g) Buddhist

- ii) State whether the following statements are true or false. Make a T for true or F for false against each statement.
 - a) Membership into an ethnic group is open to all and not restricted.
 - b) The factors, which constitute ethnic identification, may vary in significance from one society to another.
 - c) A minority group in every society is economically and politically very backward.
 - d) Ethnic boundary always corresponds to a territorial boundary in a society.
- iii) Write any three ways of achieving conversions in the Indian context. Use four lines for the answer.

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34.3 WIDESPREAD INTEREST IN AND BASIC APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF ETHNIC RELATIONS

In the previous section, we clarified the terms associated with ethnic relations. We observed that ethnic groups refer primarily to categories of ascription and identification by actors or individuals themselves. We said ethnic identity constitutes the basic form of identity by which an individual defines himself or herself and others. We undertook the task of definition and clarification because this exercise provides a framework for understanding ethnic relations in specific contexts. Before, we move on to examine ethnic relations in the Indian context, we have to be clear about two more things. Firstly, what are the reasons behind so much interest being shown in the study of ethnic relations and secondly what are the basic approaches in sociology toward the study of ethnic relations.

34.3.1 Factors Associated with the Widespread Interest

Let us take the first question. What are the factors held responsible for the spurt in focus on ethnic relations. Research has pointed out that there are several inter-related factors that have promoted this widespread interest in the study of ethnic relations. The important factors have been:

- i) **Migration:** The movement of individuals from one place to another, within a nation or between nations has led to multiplicity of groups existing within an area.
- ii) **Culture contact:** When people migrate, they take their culture along with them. They come into contact with another type of culture existing in the area to which they have migrated. This leads to the existence of different

kinds of culture groups within an area. The nature of interaction between the groups varies from place to place and from time to time depending on several factors.

- iii) **Development of technology:** Technology especially improvement in transport and communication has made the world a smaller place to live in. It has facilitated both movements of people as well as ideas and things from one place to another.
- iv) **Emergence of thickly populated cities:** The growth of cities along with the opportunities provided for varied kinds of employment has attracted many people from different socio-cultural and geographical backgrounds to converge in a city. Cities host a plurality of ethnic groups within it.
- v) **Conflict:** The increased frequency of ethnic conflicts, specially between different racial groups and religious groups has drawn world wide attention.

34.3.2 Basic Approaches

Now coming to the question relating to the basic approaches to the study of ethnic inter-relationships, we can say that explanations regarding ethnic relations can be broadly classified under two categories, namely the 'consensus approach' and the 'conflict approach'. Let us look at them separately.

a) **Consensus Approach**

This approach views the phenomenon of ethnic inter-relationships from structural- functional perspective. Structural functionalists believe that society, like the human body, is a balanced system of institutions. Each unit or institution in society serves a function in maintaining that society. Events outside or inside the society may disrupt the social order of that society, but social institutions make necessary adjustments to restore stability. The consensus approach is based on the above mentioned belief of structural functionalism. We will refer to two theories, which are based on the consensus approach here. One theory is based on the study of ethnic relations in American society. It is called the 'Cultural **Assimilation**' theory or the 'Melting Pot' theory. The other theory is based on the study of pre-colonial societies. This theory was further developed by sociologists like Barth in the 1960's to understand ethnic inter-relationships in a wider context.

i) **Cultural Assimilation Theory or Melting Pot Theory**

The theory of 'Cultural Assimilation' or the 'Melting Pot Theory' reflects the consensus approach. The theory is based on the study of American society. This theory assumes that the immigrant minority communities will get totally assimilated into the host society to the extent that they imbibe all the values, norms and attitudes of the host society. In other words, the ethnic identity of the minority group will be merged into that of the host community. In the context of the American society, this meant that the identities of the immigrant communities would get merged into the American identity and they would begin thinking from the standpoint of the Americans in general. This theory did not meet with wide acceptance, as later studies reveal that the immigrant communities such as the Italians, Chinese and others maintain their distinct identity.

ii) **Theory based on the Study of Pre-Colonial Societies**

Another theory was put forward by sociologists is based on the study of pre-colonial societies. The basic tenet of this theory is that, though ethnic groups coexisted within a nation, they each maintain separate identities through minimal social contact. This is exemplified by the presence of ethnic division of labour, which means, the preferential treatment meted out to the members of one's own ethnic group during recruitment to jobs. This indicates an absence of shared values and common will between members of diverse ethnic groups.

This theory was later developed further by sociologists like Barth (1969). According to him ethnic groups are not "maintained due to an absence or mobility and contact" but it entails the "social process of exclusion and incorporation". Stable social relations are maintained across ethnic boundaries like those of occupational and neighbourhood relations. In fact, Barth says that, social interaction between ethnic groups becomes the foundation for ethnic distinctions. The very persistence of ethnic groups in contact implies not only criterion for identification but also the structuring of interactions, which allows the persistence of cultural differences. For instance, in any social milieu we can observe the coexistence of national institutes, which cut across ethnic boundaries and at the same time we have voluntary associations and institutions that are formed to facilitate the pursuit of cultural and educational activities of a particular community.

b) **Conflict Approach**

In contrast to the above mentioned consensus approach we have the conflict approach to the study of 'ethnic relations'. Conflict approach views ethnic groups as interest groups, which are in relation of inequality, competing for common goals which may lead to a total change in the social system. The protagonists of this theory argue that since conflict is ingrained in society, any approach that overlooks this aspect is incomplete. The theorists view ethnic conflict as a means of protest for either improvement of the existing social system or a demand for total change in the system. In 1980s there was a spurt in ethnic conflicts all over the world, for example, the racial discrimination of the Blacks by the Whites in South Africa, religious conflicts between the local Sri Lankans and the immigrant Tamils, and many others. The manifestations have been in terms of riots, terrorism, demonstrations, wreckage, killing and burning of property. Ethnic conflicts are said to arise between groups that are based on unequal relationship, namely the 'majority group' and the 'minority group'. The attempt of the dominant group is to maintain their social status and authority whereas the minority group tries to alter this position. Sometimes, these attempts may take the shape of peaceful protests and endeavour to bring about change through constitutional and democratic means. But mostly, it takes the shape of deviant behaviour ranging from violent protests, riots and disturbances to crimes against person and property, organised terrorism and overthrow of the existing power.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) State the five factors associated with the widespread focus on the issue of ethnic relations. Answer in about four lines.

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ii) Tick the correct answer of the following question.

Which the following approaches is reflected in the Cultural Assimilation Theory or the Melting Pot Theory?

- a) The consensus approach
- b) The conflict approach
- c) The evolutionary approach
- d) None of the above

iii) State whether the following statements are true or false. Mark T for true or F for false against each statement.

- a) The study of ethnic relations is confined only to the U.S.A.
- b) The consensus approach views the phenomenon of ethnic relation from the Structural Functionalist Perspective.
- c) Barth, the sociologist, emphasises that ethnic groups can coexist and interact with one another without losing their cultural distinctiveness.
- d) According to the conflict approach ethnic conflicts arise between groups that are based on unequal relationship.

34.4 DIMENSIONS OF ETHNIC RELATIONS IN INDIA

The previous two sections, 34.2 and 34.3 provided us with the background knowledge about ethnic relations and interactions. Equipped with this fair amount of conceptual information about ethnic relations, let us turn our attention to India. In this section we will describe the major dimensions of ethnic relations in India.

India is a country of immense diversity. In Block 1 unit 1 of ESO-12 we outlined the different forms of diversity in India. We said race, language, religion and caste constitute the major forms of diversity in India. Groups of people in India differ from each other not only in physical or demographic characteristics but also in distinctive patterns of behaviour. These patterns of behaviour are determined by social and cultural factors like language, region, religion and caste. According to Punekar (1974) the four major premises where ethnicity in India operates are language, region, religion and caste. It may be argued that castes are divided into subcastes, language into dialects, region into sub-regions, religion into sects on ethnic lines. However, ethnic diversity is less obvious at these sub levels when compared to the larger levels of caste, language, religion and region.

Let us now examine each of the premises in detail. Language and region have been combined, as in India the division of territory or states is on the basis of language.

34.4.1 Language and Region

During the colonial rule, India was divided into several provinces for administrative purposes. This division paved the way for other language communities, in the post-colonial era, to make demand for a separate state of their own. The formation of Andhra Pradesh in 1953, on the demand of Telugu speakers in Madras Province, opened doors for other language groups to make similar demands. Further, these demands were endorsed by some of the nationalist leaders. Thus today, each language group has a State of its own, such as, Gujarat for the Gujaratis, Kerala for Malayalees and so on. At the state level, regional language is often used as the medium of instruction in schools, and colleges. This affinity and allegiance felt towards one's own language and region is often reflected outside the State of origin, that is when migrants to a new setting start their own voluntary associations to cater to their cultural needs. Thus language, in India, has been an important premise on which people have established their identities and have drawn social boundaries for defining their 'in group' and the 'out group'. Thus, it is not uncommon to find a Tamil Association in northern belt like UP or Delhi or a Malayalee association in Middle East or a Bengali association in the U.S.A.

Figure 34.1 shows the varying dimensions of ethnic conflict in India.

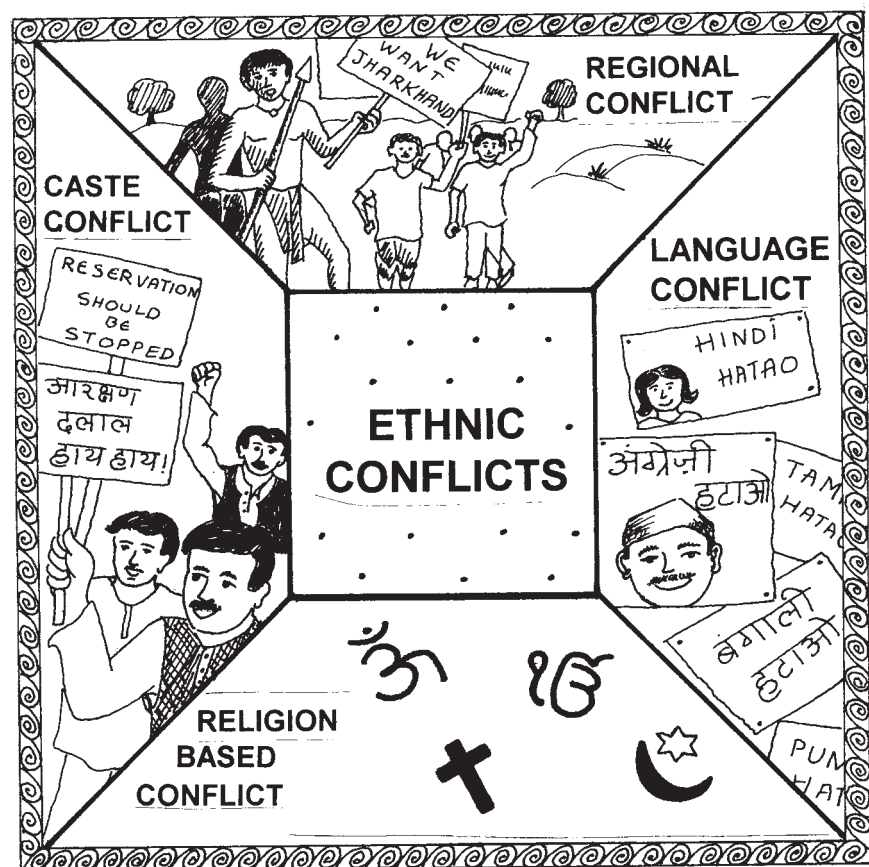


Fig. 34.1: Ethnic conflicts

34.4.2 Religion

Another form of ethnic identification is religion. In India Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism and Zoroastrianism are some of the religions practised by its people. In Block 4 of this course, you were introduced to the social organisation of these religious communities in India. In terms of numerical strength, Hindus form the majority community in India. A number of Hindu Gods and Goddesses are worshipped by different linguistic groups spread across India. It is the numerical strength of the Hindus that has been one of the factors which have led certain Hindu loyalists like the RSS (*Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh*) to assert that India is a Hindu State. In terms of economic dominance, there are disparities within a religious group and between religious communities. For instance, the Zoroastrian community is numerically very small in India. But their economic resources and status are much better than many other communities.

There is historical evidence to prove that the various religious communities in India have coexisted peacefully through time. Of course, there is also evidence that reflects the conflict between religious communities. The most well known clashes have been between Hindus and Muslims. One of the major social problems of India has been the communal divide problem. When one group asserts its interests and identity at the cost of another group, the communal divide emerges. For more information on the problem of communal divide, you must listen at your Study Centre to the audio program that has been specially prepared for this unit relating to Block 8.

34.4.3 Caste

Caste is another very important premise for ethnicity in India. Caste operates in different ways in the context of ethnic relations. Generally speaking people belonging to the same caste of different linguistic states belong to one ethnic group. However they rarely intermarry or involve themselves in any other close interactions. This has made some scholars to assert that there is no conscious solidarity of caste across the language boundaries. Some others argue caste at the same time causing fission within a particular ethnic group. For example, the Kashmiris are divided into several caste groups, which causes fission within the group, yet at the same time, a Kashmiri Brahmin finds his counterparts in other linguistic groups such as the Tamils and the Bengalis, this brings fusion to the group in a broad sense. Further, in an otherwise unranked system of ethnic dichotomy, this pan Indian system of stratification is the only factor that ranks ethnic groups hierarchically. The following figure (no. 34.2) will make this explanation clear. Under the varna system, the total Hindu population can be divided into four categories - the Brahman, the Kshatriya, the Vaishya and the Shudra.

The early vedic literature and religious texts prescribed each of the castes with their rightful occupation, rights and duties. The Brahmins, with their occupation of priesthood and scholarly pursuits, occupied the top of the social ladder; the Kshatriyas were the warriors, and were second in status, the third were the Vaishyas, the traders and the last were the Shudras, who pursued menial and lowly occupations. The 'outcastes' like the Chandals were not included in the *varna* scheme. There was restriction of social interaction between the three "twice born" castes and Shudras, and no interaction with the outcastes. Thus

members of a caste group formed as in-group and others who did not belong to it formed the out-group. Caste identity was important for the individual and social boundaries were drawn for interaction between castes.

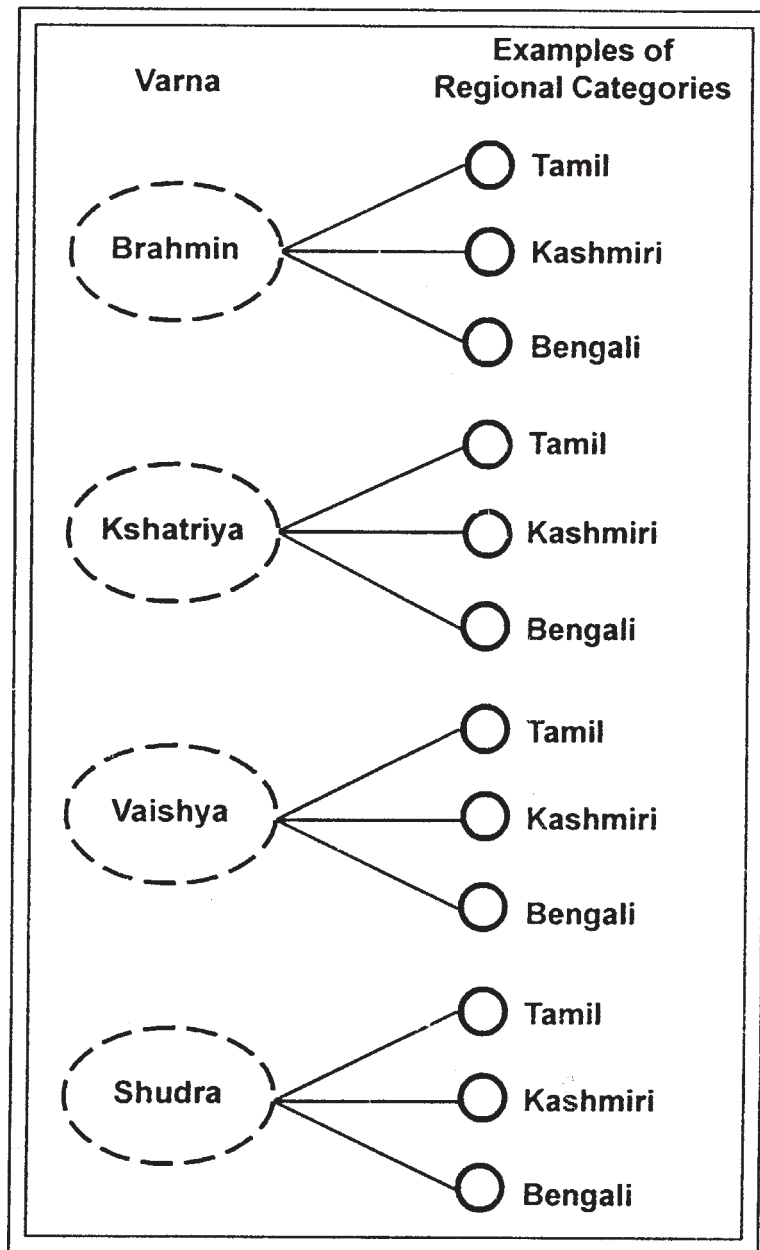


Fig. 34.2: Examples of categories of varna system

The *varna* system, however, has provided flexibility in terms of social mobility. Over the ages, several lower castes have used a higher caste status as a reference group, and have sanskritised their ways and formulated mythologies to legitimise their claims. For instance, a tailor caste in Tamil Nadu, which claimed the status of the Bhavsara Kshatriyas, went to the extent of organising an All India Conference in order to legitimise their claims.

This social mobility when accompanied with economic and political power automatically brought about an enhancement in the status of the lower castes. But most of the situations show the close association of ritual purity, economic and political power and education, as echoed in the *varna* scheme. Thus the “twice born castes” not only had ritual purity but also had greater access to

economic and political power and education. The Shudras and the outcastes, on the other hand, not only suffered the stigma of ritual impurity but also lived in abject poverty, illiteracy and had no political power.

Since the British rule, however, the political, economic power equation, between different castes has been altered. Both the British government and the Constitution of free India tried to introduce legal provisions to reduce the inequality between castes. The Backward Classes movement which emerged significantly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also contributed to upward social mobility of the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other Backward Classes. Groups of cognate (related) castes formed a large ethnic block and began to fight for a shift in the traditional distribution of power. They became politically viable. In the next unit, on social movements, we will be referring to the Backward Classes movement. What is important to remember here is that the caste has become an important basis of division between different groups of castes. In some cases, the cleavage has been between the Brahmin and the non-Brahmin upper castes. For instance, the *Satya Shodhak Samaj* (Truth Seekers Society) founded in 1873 by Jotiba Phule was anti-Brahmin in its orientation. Phule fostered a sense of identity among many middle level non-Brahmin castes like the Kunbis, Malis and Dhangars in Maharashtra, Brahmins were identified as exploiters and the non-Brahmins as the exploited (Rao 1974: 10).

In some other cases the cleavage has been between upper non-Brahmin castes and lower non-Brahmin castes as in many parts of north India. Lower non-Brahmin castes have formed their own caste associations in order to gain access to modern economic, educational and political benefits. Still another kind of cleavage has been between certain untouchable castes and the clean Hindu castes. The SNDP movement, which we will be describing in our next unit, is an example of this type of conflict. Izhavas (toddy tappers of Kerala) organised themselves in the late nineteenth century to fight the exploitation of clean Hindu castes like the Nayars and Nambudiris of Kerala (Rao 74: 11-12). The Scheduled Tribes have also formed their own respective ethnic block in different parts of India in order to fight the exploitation by the non-tribals.

Let us now briefly look at the position of the government toward ethnic groups in both British India and Independent India.

34.5 ROLE OF THE BRITISH ADMINISTRATION AND THE CONSTITUTION OF INDIA IN RELATION TO ETHNIC GROUPS

So far we have observed that language, religion and caste have been the premises on which ethnicity operates in India. It would be interesting at this point, to find out what has been the attitude or position at the governmental level toward ethnic groups. In this section, we will briefly state the role of the British administration and the Constitution of Independent India towards ethnic groups.

34.5.1 British Administration

As mentioned in the earlier section, it was during the British rule that ethnic groups like certain backward castes and classes began to organise themselves into strong associations. The British administration, on its part, provided its own source of legitimacy to the awakening among the non-Brahmin and depressed castes. Several new avenues were thrown open for claiming higher status. English education became the basis of new employment opportunities, which were free of caste consideration. Education was made available to everyone, though in actuality only the Brahmin and upper non-Brahmin castes made use of it.

The British introduced a series of administrative reforms such as the Minto-Morley Reforms of 1909, Montague Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 and the Govt. of India Act of 1935 which gave the backward classes and minority groups increased political power, economic benefits and educational opportunities (Rao, 1974: 6). In 1850 the Caste Disabilities Removal Act was passed to provide liberty to all for conversions at will from one religion to another or from one caste to another. Members converting into another religion or caste did not lose their rights of inheritance, including property. Freedom to practice one's own religion, language and culture was bestowed on all.

34.5.2 The Constitution of India

After the advent of independence in 1947, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was appointed Chairman of the Drafting Committee and Minister of Law in the Government. For deliberations of important subjects different committees were set up. The Minorities Committee was set up under the Chairmanship of Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel. Reservations in Legislature and Services was discussed by this committee. After heated debates it was agreed that the Constitution that was being drawn for India must contain adequate safeguards for those people who have been hitherto discriminated and exploited. The Constitution of India conceived of equality in terms of equality of opportunity and equal protection under the laws.

Certain groups were specifically singled out for special treatment namely: (a) the Scheduled Castes, (b) the Scheduled Tribes, and (c) the socially and educationally Backward Classes. The Constitution sanctioned reservation of seats in the educational institutions, in public employment and in State legislatures including the national Parliament in favour of members of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. It also sanctioned reservations in educational institutions and public employment in favour of socially and educationally backward classes of citizens.

The Constitutional provisions are arranged in five sections. The various provisions relate to several aspects like right to equality, prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth and right to profess and practice religion. The Constitution through its article 17 abolishes the inhuman practice of untouchability and forbids the practice of it in any form, making it an offence punishable by law.

The Constitution has also made provisions for the minorities. Though the Constitution has not specifically defined a minority, it has established the liberty of the minorities by making freedom from disabilities a fundamental right.

According to the Constitution any group which constitutes numerically less than 50 percent of the population can be called a minority. But this leaves the term ambiguous, as it does not explain whether this “less than 50 percent of the population” is as compared to that of a region or State of India. The minority Acts however, cover all religions excepting Hinduism, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

The following are some of the Acts passed in favour of the minorities. Article 15 of the Constitution, explains the specific discriminatory situation on religion, caste race, sex and so on. It prohibits the subjection of any citizen to any disability, liability, restriction or conditions on groups only of the above mentioned factors. Article 29(1) endows the right to any citizen who possesses a distinct language, script or culture to conserve the same. Article 30(1), bestows the right on the linguistic and religious minorities to establish and administer educational institutions.

The intention of the Constitutional guarantee on minority rights, is mainly to promote the distinctiveness of religious and linguistic minorities in the country. Their distinctiveness was not seen as division by the founding fathers of Indian Constitution, but as a positive contribution to the rich tapestry of unity in diversity in India. They felt that minorities were in a weaker position and that they needed protection if they were to participate in national development. The legislation on Scheduled Castes, Tribes and other Backward Classes was meant to promote the advancement of socially and economically disadvantaged groups.

Both minority rights and reservation policy for the Backward Classes are becoming increasingly sensitive issues in Indian society. In several ways and at different times both have been the focus of divisive debate and destructive violence. In our next section, we will describe certain forms of conflicts that have emerged on ethnic grounds.

Check Your Progress 3

i) What are the premises on which ethnicity operates in India? Use three lines for your answer.

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ii) How did the British contribute to the formation of an ethnic bloc among the backward classes? Answer in about four lines

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iii) Tick the right answer.

The Constitution of India

- a) does not support the reservation policy or the policy of protective discrimination.
- b) grants protection only to Scheduled Castes and Tribes.
- c) grants protection to minorities and promotes the advancement of the socially and economically disadvantaged groups.
- d) grants protection only to linguistic minorities.

34.6 ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN INDIA

The civil rights endowed with the minorities and the existence of social relations across ethnic boundaries have not prevented the occurrence of violence between ethnic groups. Over the years, from time to time, we have evidenced a great show of violence and hostility breaking out between ethnic groups. This surge of violence is a concerning issue for the government. The question arises as to why people who have co-existed peacefully for decades, suddenly turn hostile towards one another. The manifest issues are mostly religion and language.

In the following pages we shall examine a few of these issues and analyse the latent causes behind these violences.

34.6.1 Language Conflict

In 1980s tension and conflict arose over the issue of language. The government's desire to create a wider national movement in an otherwise segmental ethnic society expedited tensions in several parts of the country. The Government selected Hindi as the national language to create a national community by joining all the members of the different ethnic communities. This attempt at 'unity in diversity' had adverse effect on the Indian population. We have evidences of violence in the South like Tamil Nadu, where severe rioting took place over the Hindi issue. According to the non-Hindi speakers, the language policy of the government meant an advantage for the Hindi speakers, who are perceived to dominate the economic institutions and have political authority. To illustrate this type of conflict, we will describe the language conflict in Assam.

In Assam too, riots broke out in 1972, between the immigrant Bengali Hindus and the local Assamese population. The Assamese demanded the withdrawal of the option of answering in Bengali. Earlier, similar riots had occurred after independence, when the Assamese had demanded their language be made the regional language. These conflicts must be viewed within the economic and political structure of Assam.

There are three communities that dominate the different sections of the economic sphere of Assam. The Bengali Muslims, who are migrants from Bangladesh, who either serve in the tea gardens or manage their own land; the Marwaris, who monopolise trade; and the Bengali Hindus, who are migrants from West Bengal, and dominate the administrative services. The Assamese were unable to avail these opportunities as they lacked in skills and contacts to take up banking activities of the Marwaris. Secondly, they lacked education

to take up the administrative jobs. Finally, they were unwilling to work in the estates at low wages.

India's Independence had two effects on Assam. The Congress party that came to power in the State then, was dominated by Assamese and there was a growing emergence of an Assamese middle class. This middle class with its interest in the administrative services considered the Bengali Hindus an obstacle to their economic advancement. Also any policy giving job preference to the Assamese would have automatically applied to the Bengali Hindus who have lived there for many decades. And the latter being more qualified stood a better chance for recruitment. These facts materialised in the growing fear of economic domination amongst the Assamese middle class who wanted to prevent the growing economic strength of the Bengali Hindus. The Assamese middle class reacted through an assertive regional identity in order to claim their due share in the economic development.

34.6.2 Religious Conflict

The genesis of religious conflicts in India is often attributed to the advent of Muslims to this country. But this kind of theorisation is erroneous, as communalism, as a socio-political form is a modern phenomenon. Tensions had prevailed between the Hindus and Muslims prior to the colonial rule, due to the expropriation or dispossession of power of the Hindus by the Muslims (Malabar). But these tensions were accentuated later with the British introduction of electoral policy and the imperialist divide-and-rule policy; this gave rise to the competitiveness and hostility between the two communities. This later materialised in the emergence of the Muslim League leading later to the formation of Pakistan.

Though the nationalist leaders believed that the communal problems would be resolved in the post-Independent period, they were proved wrong. Let us look at some examples of ethnic conflict based directly on religion.

i) Hindu-Muslim Conflicts in Moradabad, Uttar Pradesh

The manifest cause behind the rioting of August 1980, was the entry of a pig in a congregation during Id. Some 50,000 persons were gathered to listen to the *qutbah* or sermon, when the pig wandered inside violating the Muslim sense of cleanliness and defiling the sanctity of the prayer. This incident was followed by looting, arson, and rape by a frenzied mob. The rampaging and killing by one group was retaliated by the other party.

This incident throws light on in the socio-political structure of the town. The Muslims in this town had been traditional artisans engaged in making brassware vessels. In the latter part of 1970s, some of them have started manufacturing brassware and exporting it to the West Asian countries. This has broken the existing monopoly of the immigrant Punjabi businessmen. These immigrant Hindu Punjabis were originally from Pakistan who came to India after Partition. The relative success and prosperity to the Muslim businessmen disturbed their Hindu counterparts. The Muslims were securing extensive orders from West Asian countries and their commonality of religion with these West Asian countries magnified and adverse fears of the Hindu businessmen on communal lines. The Muslims were rapidly acquiring sufficient capital to purchase sophisticated tools, to own property and were expanding their business in a

large scale. The spectre of Muslim dominance and Gulf money was raised. The political parties exploited these fears. The trade interests and economic jealousies became instrumental in fanning the fires of communalism aided by political parties and financed by traders. A climate of hostility and suspicion was created, which resulted in violent rioting.

ii) **Hindu-Sikh Conflicts in Punjab**

When viewing the Hindu-Sikh situation we are faced with a problem. Compared to the previous cases of language and religious conflicts discussed earlier, here we are confronted with people who are culturally well assimilated. The Hindus and the Sikhs in Punjab often intermarried. The case of one of the sons of a Punjabi-Hindu family being converted to Sikhism is not uncommon. Unlike the Hindu-Muslim relations, there have been no historical animosity between the Sikhs and the Hindus. Yet sharp conflicts arose between the two communities in 1980s.

There had occurred a succession of violent happenings. Starting with the killing of innocent people in Punjab, followed by the army action in the Golden Temple, and the subsequent assassination of the late Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. This assassination was followed by a frenzy of mass killing of Sikhs in Delhi and surrounding areas. There was a one sided brutal assault on the Sikhs. Their property was set on fire and goods stolen from their shops. The whole community was made a scapegoat for the actions of a few co-religionists. The intensity of the violence was more on the outskirts of the city than within.

The Punjab problem can be viewed in the light of the political rivalry between one-time ruling Congress party at the Centre and the Akali Dal in Punjab. This militant political wing of the Sikh community demanded not only religious autonomy but economic and political autonomy as well. Their demand of share in river water, hydro-electric power, control over Chandigarh, Abohar and Fazilka areas, all echoed this desire.

The Akalis represented the aspirations of the Sikh upper class, who had come in direct conflict with the Punjabi Hindu upper class. The difference in the ideologies of the Hindus and the Sikhs could be traced to their social division. A high proportion of the Sikhs resided in the rural areas and were engaged in rural activities, whereas a high proportion of the Hindus lived in the urban areas and followed commercial and administrative services. In their inter-commercial rivalry, the businessmen of the two communities found it to their advantage to mobilise their respective communities. The Akalis on their part wanted to assert their religious hold over the prosperous Jat Sikhs, who dominated the rural areas, and were getting increasingly alienated from the traditional religious hold. Thus both for the Akalis and the affluent section of the Sikhs, the assertion of the communal identity by way of religious channel had become most essential for mass support. This growing need to alienate from the mainstream of Indian nationalism, derived its support and finance from affluent Sikhs, especially those residing abroad. The Sikhs were divided into the terrorists, the supporter of the fundamentalist ideology and those who did not support it, the moderates.

34.6.3 Common Features of Ethnic Conflicts

Certain general features can be observed from the study of ethnic conflicts in India. These are:

- Ethnic conflicts are a consequence of organised communal bodies. For the conflict to become a public issue, usually the organised bodies, which are backed by political parties, have to come to the fore. Thus communal bodies become institutionalised.
- Ethnic conflicts indicate that whatever be the manifest cause - language, region or religion - the latent cause is not rooted in cultural disparity. Conflicting economic and political interests form the basis of the latent cause. The tensions generally arise when a minority group feels deprived of an equal position in either the economic or political sphere as compared to the majority group, uses the primary ties to motivate and activate their ethnic group against the dominant group. For instance, the Hindu-Sikh conflict was between peoples who were not culturally different, but rather were well-assimilated group. Thus, we may say, that ethnic conflicts arose not because of some common goals but because of conflicting interests.
- The allegiance or the basis of group loyalty depends on the principle of mutual interest. For instance, during the 1972 Assam riots, the Bengali Muslims, who share cultural similarities with Bengali Hindus did not side with them, instead they supported the Assamese in exchange of not being ousted from their land, by the politically active Assamese.

Activity 2

Take a month's issue of a newspaper. Note down the following:

- i) Reports about common, friendly celebration of festivals by members belonging to different ethnic groups.
- ii) Reports about ethnic conflicts.

Here note down a) what is the main issue involved, b) which are the groups in conflict and c) who are the leaders backing this conflict.

Write a note of about two pages on 'Ethnic Relations and Conflicts'. Compare, if possible, what you have written with those written by other students at your Study Centre.

34.7 SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM OF ETHNIC CONFLICTS

A coherent and effective response to ethnic conflicts has to keep in mind, the common as well as the unique factors, which account for clashes between groups of people. Some insist that so long as economic inequalities exist, such clashes are bound to persist. Since it is not easy to end economic disparities between people, ethnic conflicts will also not be easy to stop.

Some others argue that before looking at the long-term solutions to these problems, certain immediate steps can be taken. Those who favour this suggest that the first step towards sustenance of communal harmony is to identify the causes that flare up riots. These are: (a) rumours, (b) suspicion against the other community, (c) building up sectarian feelings amongst people by religious heads, local political party, and self styled leaders. To overcome these it is important to induce encouragement in people to widen their perspectives, to keep an open mind and to be tolerant towards others. This can be achieved by encouraging the members of the different communities to have a dialogue, with each other. This would help in understanding the other community and also reflect their own limitations and the possibility of overcoming them. People favouring these measures also insist that cross-cultural participation must be more frequent, especially during festivities and ceremonies. The people in the riot prone areas must be made to understand not to give ear to rumours unless it is followed with evidence. Because of the absence of direct communications, politicians, self-styled leaders and miscreants circulate rumours, which cannot be verified. This aggravates tensions. The process of sustenance of communal harmony is most essential in spite of it being slow and requiring a lot of patience and toil to reach to the grassroot level of society in order to motivate and socialise people.

Check Your Progress 4

- i) Which of the following would you list as an ethnic conflict? Tick the right answer.
 - a) Fight between X and Y politicians for the post of Chief Minister.
 - b) Hindu-Muslim conflict in Moradabad in UP in the 1980s.
 - c) Clashes between two women over jumping a queue at a bus stop.
 - d) The non-Brahmin movement in South India to fight against exploitation by the Brahmins.

ii) What are the common features exhibited by ethnic conflicts in India? Use four lines for your answer.

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iii) What is the long-term suggestion advocated by some to contain the problem of ethnic conflicts? Use two lines for your answer.

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34.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we examined the phenomenon of ethnic relations and ethnic conflicts in India. We began the unit by defining and clarifying terms like ethnic, ethnic groups, ethnic identity, ethnic boundary, majority and minority groups and conversions. We defined ethnic as something pertaining to a group of people who share some physical and/or socio-cultural characteristic. Then we moved on to state the factors associated with the widespread interest in the study of ethnic relations all over the world. The factors mentioned are migration, culture contact, technology, cities and conflicts. We also outlined the basic approaches to the study of ethnicity namely, the consensus approach and the conflict approach. Having sketched the framework for looking at ethnic relations in specific societies, we went on to describe ethnic relations in India. We described the premises on which ethnicity operates in India namely region, language, religion and caste. We noted the role of the British and the Constitution towards the ethnic groups in India. We then observed that clashes have occurred between ethnic groups over control of social, economic and educational resources. We then outlined the forms of ethnic conflict in India namely language conflicts and religious conflicts. We summarised the common features found in ethnic conflicts. Lastly, we stated the solutions offered to tackle the problem of ethnic conflicts in India.

34.9 KEYWORDS

- Assimilation** It refers to a mental process, whereby the minority migrant group starts identifying themselves with the host community. Its identity merges into that of the dominant group.
- Miscegenation** This is a term introduced by a group of sociologists, in their study of ethnic relations between the Whites and the Blacks in America. It means racial intermixing.

34.10 FURTHER READING

Barth, F. 1969. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organisation of Cultural Differences*. Alien and Unwin: London.

Barua, Indira et al (ed.) 2002. *Ethnic Groups, Cultural Continuities and Social Change in North-East India*. Mittal: New Delhi

Danda, Ajit K. 1999 (ed.) *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Integration*. The Asiatic Society: Calcutta

Gupta, Dipankar 2000. *Culture, Space and the Nation-State*. Sage Publications: New Delhi

Weiner, Myron 1978. *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India*. Oxford University Press: Delhi

34.11 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) b, c, f and g
- ii) a) F b) T c) F d) F
- iii) The three ways of achieving conversion in Indian Society are (a) inter-ethnic marriages, (b) taking up another religion, (c) caste mobility.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) The five factors are migration, culture contact, technology, emergence of thickly populated cities and conflicts between ethnic groups.
- ii) a
- iii) a) F b) T c) T d) T

Check Your Progress 3

- i) The premises on which ethnicity operates in India are language, region, religion and caste.
- ii) The British threw open educational and employment opportunities to all members irrespective of their caste or religion. They passed a series of legislative reforms, which gave increased economic political and educational benefits to the hitherto backward classes.
- iii) c

Check Your Progress 4

- i) b and d
- ii) Ethnic conflicts in India seem to be an organised body of conflicts supported by political parties. Though the manifest cause seem to be the region, language, religion or caste, the latent cause seem to be conflicting economic and political interests.
- iii) Reduction or removal of economic inequalities between people is a long term solution to the problem of ethnic conflicts.