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# UNIT 16 LINGUISTIC AND ETHNIC MINORITIES IN STATE POLITICS

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## 6.1 INTRODUCTION

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The linguistic and ethnic minorities occupy a significant place in democracy. Their empowerment in terms of participation in political processes, ability to avail of the distributive justice, security, freedom, equality, etc. is indicative of level of success of a democracy. In a multicultural and diverse society like India the multiple identities based on the diverse factors – caste, language, religion, race, culture, traditions, customs, etc. play significant role in impacting their place in democracy. The mobilisation, patronage, discrimination, in society and politics based on these markers form significant part of a democratic system. This unit attempts to acquaint the students with the linguistic and ethnic minorities in state politics in India.

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## 16.2 WHO ARE THE LINGUISTIC AND ETHNIC MINORITIES ?

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A minority is a group of persons whose numbers are smaller than the number of another group. It is a relative term; a group is minority in comparison to the other group, which forms the majority. The basis of the minority status of a group or community could be a single marker or more, i.e, language, religion, culture, customs, traditions, race, economy, etc. The denomination of a community whether it a linguistic, religious or cultural minority or majority depends on the basis of factor with which the group or the community is identified. The scholars in India generally address a community of the basis of single marker – language, religion or region. And the religion-based identity formation in particular is considered as communal. But the scholars following the American or European traditions consider the identity formation on both single and multiple markers as ethnic or communal. They use ethnic and communal interchangeably. The Indian scholars generally consider that identity as ethnic which is formed by multiple factors – language, caste, religion, culture, customs, traditions, race, economy, etc. However, Dipankar Gupta holds that ethnicity and communalism are different: the ethnicity refers to mobilisation with reference to the nation-state – the territory and sovereignty. The mobilisation which does not refer to the nation-state referents is communal mobilisation.

There could be two levels of identification of the linguistic minorities - national and state/Union Territories. Even within the states there are again vertical and horizontal levels where the linguistic minorities exist. At all India level the linguistic majority consists of Hindi speakers; other linguistic groups are linguistic minorities. But the linguistic groups which are minorities at the all India level are linguistic majorities in different states. The groups within the states which do not speak the language of majority are linguistic minorities. All states of India have more than one linguistic minorities. The formation of states in the basis of language did not remove the linguistic diversities from there. Rather a large number of linguistic minorities live in every state. Within the states, the areas which border another state have the linguistic minorities, which could belong to the linguistic groups of another state.

There are 18 national languages, which are listed in the VIII Schedule of the Constitution. These are Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Malayalam, Marathi, Manipuri, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu. Except Hindi, most of these languages are the principal languages in a single state. From these languages Hindi is expected to “draw” its vocabulary wherever necessary and primarily on Sanskrit and secondarily on other languages. Besides, there are hundreds of dialects and languages in different regions spoken by variety of communities within the states. Many of these communities are demanding inclusion of their dialects and languages in the VIII Schedule of the Constitution. Their inclusion in VIII Schedule depends on the political factors. In fact, Cynthia Groff argues that “The large number of languages in India remains a political question and census categorization of minority language impacts that number”. Though the minority languages do not have formal constitutional recognition as the official languages, these do matter in forming the identity of the community which speak them, and are important political mobilisers. Though minority languages are not given official recognition like the 18 languages mentioned in the VIII Schedule, there are safeguards (Arts. 29-30) to protect the linguistic and cultural interests of the linguistic minorities “from prohibition of their languages and from some discrimination”.

However, except the provisions for setting up the cultural and linguistic institutions, the linguistic minorities do not enjoy any protection. No attempts are made by the political establishment to address the issues of linguistic minorities, since they lack political clout. Some scholars like Pattanayak believe that the “Three-Language Formula does not include the mother tongue of minorities.” The adoption of Three-Language Formula also varied from state to state; some opted for three and some for the four language formula. Some observers, in fact, argue that the Three-Language Formula is discriminatory: in the Hindi speaking areas in reality it is Two-Language Formula, while for the linguistic minorities in several states it is virtually a four-Language Formula.

The significance of language as the basis of identity in India was recognised in the early twentieth century when Congress had organised itself on the linguistic lines. But after independence Congress had shown its reluctance to organise states on the linguistic basis till the state reorganisation Commission made its recommendation for linguistic organisation of states. This too was in the wake of the death of a Gandhian, P. Sriramulu, from Andhra Pradesh as a result of the hunger strike demanding a Telugu state Andhra Pradesh, which was created in 1953. The reorganisation of the states on the linguistic basis in 1956, however, did not resolve the language question. In the new states there were several languages which were spoken by the minority of people. These languages did not get the official recognition as well. This gave rise to the language-based conflicts within the states. The linguistic majorities allege that the linguistic minorities have

not adjusted to assimilated/respected the language of the majorities; the latter must do so as it is expected of them. The linguistic minorities on the other hand allege that they are discriminated against by the majority communities, which imposed their language on the former. This ultimately entails the demise of their language and culture. They demand that their language should be saved. One of means for this could be establishment of a state based on their language; some demand territorial autonomy within the states. Such demands continue to be raised in one or the other state of the country.

There is close a relationship between ethnicity and the linguistic identity. Some scholar do not differentiate between ethnicity, linguistic identify and communalism. A linguistic minority also shares multiple attributes among its members. In a mobilisation, which may be on a single factor, language, there is the collective mobilisation of the members of the linguistic groups. It is particularly so in the context of conflict between members of one linguistic group and those of another. Therefore, at the time of mobilisation the distinction between the ethnic identity of a group and its linguistic identity get blurred.

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### **16.3 LINGUISTIC MINORITIES AND POLITICS**

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Politics of linguistic minorities has principally been impacted by these factors: their perception of themselves and of the linguistic majorities, the attitude of the linguistic majorities towards them, and the linguistic majorities' perception of the linguistic minorities. The linguistic majorities in different states have demanded that the linguistic minorities accept the language of the majorities as medium of instruction in educational institutions and the official language. They have done it through the three or four language formula. The linguistic minorities have demanded protection of their language by demanding its inclusion in VIII Schedule of the Constitution. It must be noted that demand for recognition of language as an official language or its inclusion in the VIII Schedule is rarely made as an independent demand; it is one of the several demands. In this respect the demands of the linguistic minorities are also demands of the ethnic minorities. A linguistic minority can also be an ethnic minority simultaneously. The ethnic minorities also demand separate states for themselves; they feel in such states their cultural and linguistic identity will be protected. Often the differences between linguistic groups in a state lead to linguistic riots. There are innumerable examples of riots between linguistic majorities and minorities in states of India. This section discusses some of these cases the relationships between the linguistic minorities and politics.

Let us start with the north-east India. There are a large number linguistic minorities in state of North-East India. The linguistic groups of the region can again be linked to the ethnic groups. The latter belong to two blocs of ethnic communities – the minorities indigenous groups which have not migrated from anywhere else outside the state, and those who have come from other states and settled there over the years in search of employment. The latter consist of minority multi-lingual groups. But the former consist of several single language minority groups. Assam is among the north-eastern states where the linguistic minorities have resisted the attempts of the linguistic majority to make its language as official and court language of all. The minority linguistic groups have resisted it by demanding protection of their own languages by asking for opening the educational institutions where the medium of instruction could be their mother tongue rather than that of the linguistic majority. In Assam the principal linguistic conflict has been between the Assamese and the non-Assamese languages. When Assam was a composite state, i.e., before

other states were carved of Assam, the conflict was between the Assamese on the one hand and the non-Assamese on the other. The latter included the Bengali, tribal languages, etc. But after formation of separate states out of Assam, especially Meghalaya in 1972, in Assam the main contradiction has been Bengalis and Assamese. Bengalis are a minority linguistic group in Brahmaputra Valley and Assamese in Barak Valley. The Bengalis fear that introduction of Assamese as the official language would hamper the progress of Bengalis in Brahmaputra Valley.

The Assamese-Bengali linguistic conflict in Assam can be traced back to the colonial policies. Within a few years of the occupation of Assam, the British made the Bengali as the official language. The Assamese had alleged that the British did so under the pressure of the Bengalis and it was discriminatory to them. They demanded that the Assamese be declared as an official and court language in Assam. This gave birth to a debate between the intellectuals of two linguistic groups. The Bengalis argued that there was no need for a separate court language for Assam, as Assamese was a dialect of the Assamese. The Assamese intellectuals on the other hand argued that Assamese was not a dialect of Bengali; it was an independent language with its own script and history. The Bengalis should be replaced with the Assamese as an official language. The British in fact declared Assamese as official language of Assam in 1873. Since then the conflict between the two linguistic groups continued in one or the other form. It assumed violent form in the post-independence period when the Assamese government introduced Assamese as an official language in 1960. It also resulted in demand for a tribal state in the Khasi dominated part of Assam. All non-Assamese communities including Bengalis, other non-tribals and tribal groups launched an agitation for formation of a separate state. With the formation of Meghalaya, the Assamese no longer remained the official language. But within Assam the linguistic minorities, both tribals and Bengalis, continue to complain of the discrimination by the linguistic majorities.

The formation of the linguistic states gave the status of linguistic majorities to those groups which were linguistic minorities in the context of all India scenario. But it placed the linguistic minorities within these states in vulnerable position. Apart from facing discrimination in the linguistic policies, they became targets of the attack of the dominant linguistic groups in a different context as well. For example, the linguistic community which is a majority in one state is a majority in another and vice-versa. The conflict between these groups which is not necessarily language-based has its repercussions for them in another states. The linguistic groups in two south Indian states - Tamil Nadu and Karnataka were involved in fierce language riots in 1992. These riots were in no way related to language. It was a fall out of the conflict which took place between two states over sharing of Cauvery water. The Tamil speaking community was targeted by the Kannada speakers in Karnataka causing damage to their property and lives. The minority Tamil linguistic groups demanded the introduction of special measures for the protection of their language and property.

Paul R Brass argues that the state governments have introduced discriminatory policies against the minority languages and the central government has not protected them. The attitude towards Urdu and Mithila spoken in north Bihar are among such examples. Besides, Urdu which is spoken several parts of the country, and is the single largest minority language in U P, has been subject to controversy by the communal forces. Any attempt to give Urdu as a status of official language is met with the criticism by certain groups that it was an appeasement of Muslims. But the Urdu speaking sections, which include both Hindus and Muslims see the opposition to Urdu as an attempt to discriminate against the linguistic minorities.

In Punjab also the linguistic issue got linked with the communal divide between Hindus and Sikhs during the Punjabi Suba movement of the 1960s. The Arya Samaj impacted the vision of non-Sikh Punjabis, who declared their language in the census enumeration as Hindi, though in reality it was Punjabi. It was mainly because of the communalisation of language and apprehension of Hindus that creation of separate states of Punjab excluding Haryana would reduce the Hindus to a minority community in Punjab. They felt by declaring Hindi as their mother-tongue would weaken the case for a separate state of Punjab.

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## **16.4 ETHNIC MINORITIES AND POLITICS**

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As mentioned earlier, in Indian context the ethnic identity is based on multiple factors unlike the linguistic identity, caste or communal identity which is based on a single attribute. Since ethnic identity is a relative identity, the politics of one ethnic group is formed in the light of the politics of another ethnic group. Again, the ethnic politics to a large extent depends on the real and imagined factors. All states of India have ethnic minorities. But it is generally in the states which have witnessed the political movements for self-determination movements – autonomy movements, secessionist movements, insurgencies, that their politics assumes special significance. A large number of states are witnessing such movements. But these are most assertive in north-east India, Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab. This section deals with the relationship between politics and ethnic minorities in these states. It also attempt to reflect on the issue in context of the newly created states.

In north-east Indian states there are two types of ethnic minorities - one, those who have been living there since centuries, those who have settled there as a result of migration from different parts of the country since nineteenth century, and who still continue to immigrate into the region. Each of the ethnic minority groups is further divided in their background, culture, etc. The immigrant settlers are further divided on the basis of their original states, the states from where they have migrated. But in times of their conflict with the majority ethnic groups, their differences get blurred and they tend to unite into an informal federation of ethnic minorities. Some time even the single ethnic minority has been in conflict with the majority ethnic minority, which leaves them divided into distinct ethnic minorities. Some of the most important examples of politics of ethnic minorities in north-east India are relatd to the Kukis in Nagaland, the Bodos, Santhals, Karbis in and non-tribals in Assam, and the non-tribals in Meghalaya.

The ethnic minorities sometime join the majority ethnic groups in a common pursuit. But after the movement has achieved its purpose, the dominant ethnic group does not give them their due and recognition. This gives them a feeling of neglect and discrimination. As a result they also demand autonomy for their ethnic group. The examples of Bodos and Karbi tribes of Assam are suitable in this context. These two tribes participated wholeheartedly in the six year long agitation against the foreigners in Assam led by AASU. But when the AGP formed the government, their problems were neglected by the AGP/ASSU which was dominated by the majority ethnic group of Assam. As a result the Bodo started an agitation demanding creation of a Bodoland. The same pattern is applicable to the Karbi tribe of the Karbi Anlong district.

The politics of ethnic minorities is decided by the course of the politics of ethnic majorities. Let us take the example of the ethnic majorities in case of Meghalaya. The ethnic minorities there are three local tribes – Khasis, Garos and Jaintias. The principal ethnic majorities are Bengalis,



Nepalis, Biharis and Rajasthanis/Marwaris. Both groups of these ethnic communities joined together to demand a separate state of Meghalaya to be carved out of the then Assam in the 1960s. One of the principal reasons of their demand for a separate was their common grievance against making Assamese an official language, which they resisted as the ethnic majorities in Assam. The relations between them at that time were marked by ethnic harmony. But in the wake of formation of Meghalaya in 1972, the relations between ethnic minorities and majorities were characterised by ethnic conflict.

The politicians belonging to the ethnic majorities introduced certain policies in order to protect their identity, tradition and culture. They introduced the property laws, which prevented the non-tribals in general and tribals from other states from purchasing, inheriting and selling the property; reserved seats in the state government jobs and state assemblies for the local tribes or the ethnic majorities there. Besides, a large number of demands have been made which attempt to favour the majority ethnic community of the state. These contributed to the widening of ethnic divide between ethnic majorities and minorities. It also resulted in ethnic riots.

The politics of ethnic majorities provides a context to the politics of ethnic minorities. Unlike the politics of the ethnic majorities, the politics of the ethnic minorities does not always take the form of formidable political parties or effective political mobilisation. It is expressed in the form of complaints of violation of their political and human rights. They complain of being discriminated against in terms of right to get elected, get jobs and enjoy basic rights. The majority ethnic communities defend special measures given by state for them as special right as enshrined in the VI Schedule of the Constitution. The ethnic minorities argue that if special measures are not introduced for them, the ethnic majorities would encroach upon their rights. This will result in extinction of their identity.

Another region which enjoys special protection under the Article 370 of the Constitution is Jammu and Kashmir. There are three major ethnic minorities in the state – these are Buddhist tribes of Laddakh region, the people of Jammu region and the Kashmiri Pandits. In the context of politics of Jammu and Kashmir the principal markers of ethnic identity of the Kashmiri Pandits is religion, of the other two groups these are religion, language and region. These three groups have felt discriminated against by the dominant ethnic groups of Kashmiris. The Kashmiri Pandits became victim of the insurgency; being displaced from their ancestral habitat. The main ground for their discrimination has been religion. Their politics has revolved around the issue of their survival, human rights, and rehabilitation. They have become the victims of militancy because they belong to an ethnic minority. In fact, some of their representatives have demanded creation of a separate state consisting of Kashmiri Pandits as the major ethnic group.

The ground of the grievances of the ethnic minorities in Jammu and Laddakh regions is both regional and religious. They allege that the dominant ethnic groups of the state control the state power, which they use to strengthen their base in the Kashmir region. Their different religious and cultural background compound their discrimination further. Its repercussion in the politics are found in the demand for the status of Union Territory to the Laddakh region and for a separate state for the Jammu region. The Hindu rightist political organisations demand division of the state into three parts on the basis of religion.

Ethnic minorities in states have become an issue on which the ethnic majorities play their politics.

Their presence is projected by the politicians belonging to the latter as detrimental to their development. The ethnic minorities are seen as the appropriators of the job opportunities, grabbers of properties, as exploiters (in the case of north-east) of their natural resources and as threat to their cultural identity. Some of these allegations are imagined. The politicians belonging to the dominant ethnic groups demand protection of “the sons of the soil”. They launch political agitation for removal of the “outsiders” from their state/city. Very often this leads to the ethnic violence. In the specific political context, especially before or after elections the demands of the “sons of the soil” become more strident. The Shiv Sena movement against the immigrant settlers in Mumbai and such agitations in north-east are some of the examples of ethnic minorities becoming the issue of political contestation and mobilisation.

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## 16.5 SUMMARY

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Empowerment of linguistic and ethnic minorities is an indication of the success of a democracy. The minorities are those groups whose numerical strength is smaller than other, the majorities. The basis of identification of a linguistic minority is language, while that of the ethnic minority is multiple. The latter mainly consists of caste, language, region, customs, tradition, economy, etc. Often the boundaries of the linguistic and ethnic minorities overlap. It is generally the scholars in India who differentiate between the identity formed on the single variable - linguistic, communal (religion) or caste, and the multi-variable ethnic identity. The scholars following the American and European traditions use the ethnicity and linguistic or the communal identity interchangeably.

Almost all states of India have linguistic minorities. Their politics is relative. It occurs in relation to the politics of linguistic ethnic majorities or in the context of it. The linguistic and ethnic minorities feel neglected and discriminated against by the majorities. The latter make the minorities as the bone contention or the target of their politics. They hold the ethnic minorities responsible for their problems. Many times it results in riots between the religious minorities and majorities. The ethnic minorities in turn demand autonomy from the majorities and recognition of their language as the official language by its inclusion in the VIII Schedule of the Constitution.

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## 16.6 EXERCISES

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- 1) Discuss the characteristics of the linguistic minorities.
- 2) Identify and discuss the features of politics of linguistic minorities in Indian states.
- 3) Discuss the patterns of politics of ethnic minorities in Indian states.