UNIT 13 LINGUISTIC AND ETHNIC GROUPS*

Structure

13.0   OBJECTIVES

This unit aims to acquaint the students with the linguistic and ethnic groups in the state politics in India. After reading this unit, you will be to;

- Explain to meaning of linguistic and ethnic groups;

- Underline differences between them; and

- Discuss politics of linguistic and ethnic groups.

13.1   INTRODUCTION

The linguistic and ethnic groups occupy a significant place in a 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 a significant role in impacting their place in democracy. Mobilisation, patronage and discrimination in society and politics based on these markers form a significant aspect of a democratic system.

13.2   WHAT ARE THE LINGUISTIC AND ETHNIC GROUPS?

Before proceeding further, let us understand what a linguistic and an ethnic group mean. Both are group identities. A linguistic group is a group of people who feel

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that they share a common language. Similarly, an ethnic group is a group of people who think that they share similarities in several aspects of life such as religion, language, culture, customs, traditions, caste, race, economy, etc. We can thus see linguistic group is formed on the basis of single factor or marker, i.e., language, and an ethnic group is formed on the basis multiple factors or markers. It is important to note that some scholars consider both kinds of groups – those based on single marker as well as those based on multiple markers as ethnic groups. Generally, Indian scholars based in Indian institutions and the scholars based in American and European institutions allude to group identity from single and multiple factors in slightly different ways. The scholars based in Indian institutions identify a group formed on the basis of a single factor as single-factor group; for example, a linguistic group - the Tamil, the Telugu, and the Hindi or Maithili formed on the basis of language as a single marker, or caste/caste group-based identity such as Dalits, OBCs, high castes, or Brahmin or Rajput identity formed on the basis of caste or caste group as a single factor. And they refer to ethnic group to the group which formed based on multiple factors. For example, Naga or Mizo group identity formed on the basis of several markers – culture, language, customs, history, geography, clan, etc. denote ethnic identity of Nagas or Mizos. Unlike them, the scholars based in American and European institutions do not distinguish between groups formed on single and multiple factors. For them, both groups formed from single marker as well as multiple markers are ethnic groups. In this unit, you will read about the linguistic group as an identity based on a single marker and ethnic group as an identity formed on multiple markers.

13.3 LINGUISTIC GROUPS

There could be two levels of identification of the linguistic groups- national and state/ Union Territories. At all India level the linguistic majority consists of Hindi speakers, and other linguistic groups are linguistic minorities. But several linguistic groups which are minority linguistic groups at the all-India level are linguistic majorities in various states or in the regions within the states. The groups within the states which do not speak the language of the majority are linguistic minorities. All states of India have more than one linguistic group.

13.3.1 Linguistic Groups in India

In India, languages can be classified into different categories: mother tongues, dialects, and official languages. Mother tongue is the language which a person learns from his or her childhood. Dialect denotes mother tongue spoken by a particular community or groups of communities generally living in a particular geographical area. Official languages are those mother tongues or dialects which have got official recognition for official works and medium of instruction in educational institutions. There are different official languages in different states. The groups identified based on languages spoken by them are known as linguistic groups, for instance, Telugu, Punjabi, or Kannada speaking people. At all India level, Hindi is the official language. It means that all official work pertaining to the central government offices is transacted in Hindi as an official language. Similarly, the official work in a state is carried out in its official language. Some states have more than one official language. Asha Sarangi in the book edited by her *Language and Politics* in India (2009) discusses the relationship between language and politics. She highlights that the first survey to identify and classify

languages was done by Geogre Grierson during colonial India between 1903 and 1923. The reports of the survey were published in twelve volumes entitled *Linguistic Survey of India* (LSI). The LSI identified179 languages and 544 dialects in India. According to Asha Sarangi Grierson's survey was used by census commissioners to compile data in the subsequent linguistic surveys. Since 1881, the number of mother tongues in India has been varying. In the 1991census, there were 1,652 languages which were grouped into 114 mother tongues. In 1951 census, several dialects were referred as dialects of Hindi – Maithili, Bhojpuri, Magadhi. Even Maithili was included in Hindi in 1961 and 1971 censuses (Asha Sarangi 2009; pp.14-15). Official languages in India are placed in the VIII Schedule of the Constitution. There are 22 languages in India which are recognized as official languages are placed in the VIII Schedule. These are languages are as follows: Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Dogri, Gujarati*,* Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Malayalam, Marathi, Manipuri, Maithili, Nepali, Odia, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Santhali, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu. From these languages Hindi is expected to "draw" its vocabulary wherever necessary and primarily on Sanskrit and secondarily on other languages. Many communities in India demand inclusion of their dialects and languages in the VIII Schedule of the Constitution. Their inclusion in VIII Schedule depends on the political factors. There are safeguards (Arts. 29-30) in Indian Constitution to protect the linguistic and cultural interests of the linguistic groups.

13.3.2 Three-language Formula

As each state in India has multiple languages, the main challenge in the country has been as to how to enable school children to interact with each other across diverse linguistic groups across states. Introduction of three-language formula is such a device conceived by policy makers associated with the education in India. The three-language formula suggests that in states children should be made to learn three languages upto (VI-VIII) standard: apart from Hindi and English, a modern Indian language be taught; the modern Indian language in the Hindi speaking-speaking states could preferably be a language spoken in south India. In non-Hindi speaking states, (except in Tamul Nadu that followed two-language formula), three-languages to be taught include – English and Hindi along with a regional language. Since language is a state subject, which languages to be included in three-language formula fall under the jurisdiction of states. The suggestion to introduce three-language formula first made in the meeting of the Central Board of Education (CABE) the 1950s. Following the recommendations of the National Commission on Education (1964-66) known as Kothari Commission, three-language formula was included in national education policy in 1968. The New Education Policy 2020 suggested that at least upto grade 5 the medium of instruction should be mothor tounge, and wherever possible it should be any of the following - mother tongue, home language, local language or regional language upto grade 8.

13.3.3 Linguistic Groups and Politics in India

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, the 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 happened in the wake

of the death of a Gandhian, P. Sriramulu, in 1953 following his hunger strike demanding a Telugu state out of then Madras state. In several states, there are sections who speak languages which are different from the languages spoken by majority of people in such states. They are known as linguistic minorities. The reorganisation of the states on the linguistic basis in 1956, however, did not resolve the language question. This gave rise to the language-based conflicts within the states. In India, on several occasions language has become an issue of political contest This demand has impacted the politics of several linguistic groups in India. Such politics or the linguistic politics has been impacted by the following factors: perception of linguistic of themselves and of the linguistic majorities; the linguistic majorities' perception of the linguistic minorities; and the attitude of the linguistic majorities towards linguistic minorities. The linguistic majorities in several states demand that the other linguistic groups accept the language of the majorities as medium of instruction in educational institutions, and as the official language. Several linguistic groups demand for recognition of language as an official language or its inclusion in the VIII Schedule and their recognition as official language. Such demand is generally made by the linguistic groups along with other demands relating to them such economic development, employment, protection of their cultural identities and political autonomy. In this respect the demands of the linguistic groups are also their demands as those of ethnic groups. You will read about the ethnic group in section 13.4 of this unit. The linguistic minorities demand 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. The differences between linguistic groups in a state often lead to linguistic conflicts. There are innumerable examples of linguistic conflicts in states in India. This section discusses some cases concerning relationships between the linguistic groups and politics.

Let us start with the northeast India. There are many linguistic groups in state of the northeast India. The linguistic groups in these states can generally be linked to the ethnic groups. The latter belong to two groups of ethnic communities – the indigenous groups that have not migrated from outside a state and have been living in their areas for generations, and those who have migrated from other regions in search of employment or any other purpose and settled there over the years. Both the indigenous and migrant groups also consist of several linguistic groups each. Assam is among the northeastern states where the linguistic minorities groups resisted the attempts of the linguistic majority to make its language, the Assamese, as official and court language of all. 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 Assamese and the non-Assamese languages were sources of linguistic conflict. The latter included the Bengali, tribal languages, etc. 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. Bengalis are a minority linguistic group in Brahmputra Valley and while the Assamese are a minority linguistic group in Barak Valley. In the 1960s, the Assamese government attempted to make Assamese compulsory as medium of instructions in the institutions in the areas where non-Assamese were spoken by most people. This was resisted in these areas resulting in violent clashes in the Hills and Barak valley. Bengalis feared that introduction of Assamese as the official language would hamper the progress of Bengalis in Brahmputra Valley. 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 in the Khasi, Jaintia , and Garo hills for the formation of a separate state. The new state of Meghalaya was formed in 1972. In another example, as discussed by Sanjib Baruha in *India Against Itself*, after the signing of the Assam Accord in 1986, the Bodos underlined that their identity was different from Assamese, and Bodo was their language. They demanded recognition of Bodo as an official language, which was later given this status by its inclusion in the VIII Schedule.

Linguistic groups in two south Indian states- Tamil Nadu and Karnataka were involved in fierce language-based riott in 1992. The riot was not directly related to language. It was a fall out of the conflict which took place between the 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 in Karnataka demanded the introduction of special measures for the protection of their language and property. Paul R Brass argues that the state governments introduced discriminatory policies against the minority languages and the central government did not provide protection to them. The central government's attitude towards Urdu and Mithila spoken in north Bihar is 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 and is viewed as appeasement of Muslims. But the Urdu speaking section of society consider the opposition to Urdu as an attempt to discriminate against the linguistic minorities. In Punjab, 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 as Hindi their language in the census enumeration, though in practice it was Punjabi. Hindus in Punjab apprehended that creation of separate states of Punjab would reduce the Hindus to a minority community in Punjab. Among the most crucial example of language politics is the case of Hindi language in South India, especially Tamil Nadu. In the 1960s, there was an agitation against adoption of Hindi as an official language following the decision. Hindi was adopted as an official language in the Constituent Assembly in the light of an official resolution which was passed by the Congress legislative party. After Independence, Hindi was adopted as an official language with English as a shared language for a transition period of fifteen years. The decision to introduce Hindi as an official language was opposed in south India. This resulted in protest in Madras Province (Tamil Nadu). The protest was led by Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK),

which was earlier known as Munnetra Kazhagam (DK). The DMK argued that introduction of Hindi as an official language was an attempt to impose Hindi on non-Hindi speaking people.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i)   Use the Space given below for your answer.

ii)   Check your answers with the model answers given at the end of the unit.

1)   What are the linguistic and ethnic groups?

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2)   What is Three –Language Formula according to 1968 education policy?

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13.4   ETHNIC GROUPS

13.4.1   Ethnic Groups in India

As explained earlier, ethnic groups can be identified by certain markers. As to which markers, and how many markers form an ethnic identity depends on an analysis of ethnic politics. For instance, as mentioned earlier, some scholars consider groups form on single marker such as language, caste, or religion as ethnic groups. But the other scholars consider an ethnic group which is formed on the basis of multiple factors – language, caste, race, culture, custom, religion, etc. It is difficult to ascertain the exact number of ethnic groups in India. However, we can identify them according to different criterion – social, linguistic, cultural, etc. Politics of ethnic groups revolves around issues of social and cultural identities, political representation and autonomy and economic opportunities or development. The extent of the roles of these issues varies from case to case. Sometimes one or two issues such as language, religion or regional autonomy or development affect the politics of ethnic groups; at another time, the demand for getting political autonomy within a state or formation of a state or Union territory out of one or more states becomes political issue. The relative impact of these factors in politics depends on the political context and mobilization by political leaders or non-party organisations. As ethnic politics involves different ethnic groups which have conflicting claims and interests, it sometimes results in ethnic violence between ethnic groups or between ethnic groups and state machinery

such as police or government. In literature on identity formation, one question is relevant, i.e., are ethnic identities constructed or natural, given or inherited? One approach argues that ethnic identities are artificial or constructed by elite. This is known as instrumentalist approach. It means that the political elite construct ethnic identities and use them in politics to fulfil their goals. Another approach argues that ethnic identities are natural or primordial. It means differences between different ethnic groups are natural. They are not constructed.

Region-wise principal ethnic groups in India are as follows:

13.4.2   Ethnic Groups and Politics

As mentioned earlier, in the Indian context, the ethnic identity is based on multiple factors - customs. culture, language, religion, hisrtory, etc., unlike the linguistic identity, caste or communal identity which is based on a single attribute. Since ethnic identity is about relationships, the politics of one ethnic group is formed in the light of the politics of another ethnic group. Again, ethnic politics to a large extent depends on the real and imagined factors. All states of India have several ethnic groups whose numbers vary. But it is generally in the states which have witnessed the political movements for self-determination movements, autonomy movements, secessionist movements, insurgencies, that their ethnic politics assumes special significance. Several states have witnessed such movements from time to time. Sometimes ethnic politics leads to violence between different ethnic groups. In India, among other regions, the northeast India, Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir (which was converted from a state into two Union Territories – Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh on August 5, 2019) provide examples of ethnic politics. Atul Kohli argues (Chapter 2, *Democracy and Development: From Socialism to Pro-Business*) ethnic mobilisation, which include self-determination movements, is expected in multicultural democracies. Giving examples of three ethnic movements in India, i.e., those of Tamils in Tamil Nadu in the 1950s-1960s; of Sikhs in Punjab during the 1980s, of Muslims in Kashmir in the 1990s, Kohli argues that self-determination movements follow the following trajectory: they first start and reach their peak in due course; then they continue in the position of peak for sometimes; and finally, they decline. This journey of self-determination movements or ethnic mobilization been described by Kohli as "an inverse 'U' curve". This section deals with the relationship between politics and ethnic groups in some regions of India.

In the northeast Indian states, there are two types of ethnic groups: one, those who have been living there since centuries known as indigenous people; two, those who have settled there because of migration from different parts of the country from the nineteenth century, and who continue to immigrate into the region. In several instances, there exist differences within indigenous and migrant groups each. It means that there exist several indigenous groups and migrant groups within a single state. Each of the ethnic group has distinct characteristics in terms of culture, language, customs, history, etc. These characterizes could be real or imagines or both. The immigrant settlers are be identified based on states from where they migrated. It is possible that in times of conflict the internal differences within the indigenous ethnic groups and within the migrant ethnic groups get blurred, and they tend to behave two opposite blocks of ethnic groups. Sometime even the groups which have ethnic similarities get divided in the times of conflict and competition between them. Some examples of ethnic groups in

northeast India are as follows: Kukis and Nagas in Nagaland and Manipur, Meities in Manipur, and tribes such as Bodos, Santhals, Karbis and non-tribals in Assam, and the non-tribals – Bengalis, Nepalese, and tribes such as Khasis, Jaintias and Garos in Meghalaya. Sometime, ethnic groups which generally have conflictual relationships ally with each other in a common goal. But after achievement of such goal, differences emerge within them. The smaller ethnic group allege that dominant ethnic groups do not give fair recognition to their concern after the achievement of goal which they achieved by allying with each other. This gives them a feeling of neglect and discrimination. As a result, they also demand autonomy for their ethnic group. The example of Bodos tribe of Assam is relevant in this context. The Bodos participated in the six years agitation against the foreigners in Assam led by the All Assam Students Union (AASU). But when the Asom Gana Parisad (AGP) formed the government, the Bodos underlined that their problems were neglected by the AGP government which was dominated by the larger ethnic groups of Assam. As a result, the Bodo started an agitation demanding creation of a Bodoland.

The politics of ethnic groups 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 groups 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 groups and majorities were characterised by ethnic conflict. The conflict revolved around the issues such as protection of identity, traditions, and culture of the indigenous communities, and of their economic opportunities and property rights. The indigenous ethnic communities defend special measures given by the state for them as special right as enshrined in the VI Schedule of the Constitution. The indigenous ethnic groups argue that if special measures are not introduced for them, the migrant ethnic would encroach upon their rights. This will result in extinction of their identity. The claims of indigenous communities are often disputed the non-indigenous communities. In certain politics context – competition among politician, political parties or elections the claims and counter-claims of ethnic communities result in ethnic violence.

Jammu and Kashmir had existed as a state till August 5, 2019 when it was divided in two Union Territories following the annulment of special status to it under Article 370. Until Jammu and Kashmir had existed as state, there were three regions in it – Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh. After the division of the state of Jammu and Kashmir into two Union Territories – Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh, Jammu and Kashmir regions consist of Hindus and Muslims as majority communities respectively, and Ladakh has majority of Buddhist community with smaller number of Muslims. Even though these ethnic groups play significant role in Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh as Union Territories, the patterns of ethnic politics of these groups can adequately be seen in a period when Jammu and Kashmir had existed as a state. The foundation of ethnic in Jammu and Kashmir before it was converted into two union territories was lay in factors of religion, region and region. Repercussion of ethnic politics could be seen in the

demand for the status of Union Territory to the Ladakh region and for a separate state for the Jammu region in Jammu and Kashmir prior to its division into two union territories.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the Space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answers with the model answers given at the end of the unit.

1) What do mean by ethnic politics?

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2) What are the features of ethnic politics in North-east India?

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13.5 LET US SUM UP

Different markers of identity such as caste, language, region, customs, tradition, economy, etc. play important role in politics of democratic country. Realisation in a group of people that they share common characteristics is indication of group identity formation. Group identity formation can take place on the basis of multiple factors. It can also take place on the basis single factor. When a group is formed on the basis of language, it is called linguistic group. But when a group is formed on the basis of multiple factors, it is known as an ethnic group. Some scholars consider a group as ethnic group even if is formed on the basis of single marker. Politics of linguistic and ethnic groups revolves around the protection of social and cultural identities, political representation and empowerment, and economic opportunities and development. On several occasions, ethnic politics result in violence between different ethnic groups or ethnic groups and the state institutions. Different states in India are witness to ethnic politics.

13.6 REFERENCES

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13.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR EXERCISE

Check Your Exercise 1

1) Linguistic groups are those groups which are formed on the basis of language. Members of a linguistic group speak a common language. Ethnic groups are those groups whose group formation takes place because of realisation that its members share multiple features – culture, race, religion, custom, etc. Some scholars do not differentiate between the groups formed on the basis of single marker such as language, and the groups formed on the basis of multiple markers. For them, all kinds of group formations are ethnic groups.

2) According to national education policy of 1968, three-language formula suggests that children in school from VI-VIII grade in Indian states will be taught three languages – Hindi, English and a modern Indian language. In the Hindi-speaking states, modern Indian language would include a language spoken in south India. In the non-Hindi Indian states (except Tamil Nadu that followed two-language formula), a modern Indian language could be any regional labguage.

Check Your Exercise 2

1) Ethnic politics is about political mobilization of ethnic groups on issues concerning them. These issues are related to cultural and social identities, political representation and empowerment, and economic opportunities.

2) All states of North-east India have multiple ethnic groups. They can be broadly categorised into two groups – indigenous and migrants people. Ethnic politics in North-east India is related to the protection of identities of ethnic groups, autonomy movements, and economic opportunities. On several occasions, ethnic politics culminated into ethnic conflict and violence. The violence can occur between ethnic groups or between ethnic groups and the state agencies such as police.