The Significance of Ethnic Groups as a Concept

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Abstract: This paper seeks to examine the use of the concept of ethnic group to explain society in the Indian context. It seeks to show that single indicators of collective identity in Indian sociology tend to focus on sub groups while not quite conveying the big picture of a diverse society where different kinds of groups interact in different contexts in complex ways. It is the assertion of this paper that the idea of ethnic groups and ethnicity would be a useful tool to understand contemporary society.

Key Words: Ethnic Groups, Ethnicity, Identity, Language, Region, Religion, Caste, Tribe, Social Identities.

The biggest challenge facing anyone attempting to describe and understand society at large, is to first find the descriptive tools or concepts that can adequately capture the full picture facing the researcher. What is needed is a universalistic analytic framework which adequately describes all aspects of the society without exclusion. Such a framework has been absent in the Indian case and has posed a hurdle in any attempt to move towards pan-Indian descriptions of society and its constituent groups.

The challenge, for social scientists embarking on a description of Indian society, has been the absence of concepts that apply equally to all social groups that constitute this diverse society. The diversity of the country – its multiplicity of languages, regions, religions, sects, castes and tribes –is baffling. The absence of a unifying conceptual framework has led sociology of India to treat each of the major social groups as distinct and incomparable and has resulted in the overemphasis on caste as the dominant feature of Indian society and the under-representation or exclusion of other aspects of society.

The lead in this was taken by scholars who laid the foundations of academic sociology in India. Foremost among them was G.S.Ghurye who became Professor in the first Department of Sociology in India at the University of Bombay. Ghurye's first book *Caste and Race in India* began with a chapter titled *Features of the Caste System.* It begins with the sentence "A foreign visitor to India is struck by the phenomenon known as the caste system"[1]. By doing this Ghurye succeeds in keeping out of focus any number of other factors that one may notice about Indian social life such as religions, sects, languages, or tribe for example. He did of course focus instead on race as a dimension of Indian society to try and link caste with race but not from a view of dealing with caste as a form of institutionalized racism as is being stressed by Dalit activists in more recent times. Ghurye was more interested in seeing if castes could be classified as racial types which reflected their Indo-Aryan roots.

M.N.Srinivas who is undoubtedly the next major sociologist of India, also made caste the cornerstone of his scholarship. In his 1965 essay written for The Gazetteer of India, he said in the first paragraph that "caste is ubiquitous" and it is important to note that "caste is found not only among the Hindus but also among the Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jains and Jews" [2].   It is not that Srinivas was unaware of the diversity of India – racial, religious, tribal, linguistic, urban and rural settlements and the different modes of living of all of these groups. He however went on the almost immediately to state that the "concept of unity in India is inherent in Hinduism" and the "institution of caste cuts across diverse religious groups and gives them all a common social idiom"[3].

Ghurye, followed by Srinivas and others had thus set the tone for the main building block in the analysis and understanding of Indian society. Caste became the pan-Indian analytical tool and has since been reproduced endlessly in many works. There have been a few departures attempting to analyze other aspects of Indian society such as Betéille linking caste and class but these are few and far between.

It is the contention of this paper that a comprehensive and all inclusive description of the diversity of Indian society needs a concept other then caste. The first reason for such a concept or analytical tool is that increasingly, it is clear that the caste "system" really does not exist as an all encompassing integrative system even for all Hindus. It is impossible to arrange the large variety of castes in each region of India into a single framework of varna hierarchy and nor is it desirable to do so. At ground level, castes or what have been labeled sub-castes or jatis are inter-linked in myriad ways and there is no standard hierarchy that operates. In addition caste identity is linked to other factors such as region, language, urban and rural spread, occupation, income, co-existence with other religions and tribes and so forth. A better understanding of the operative units of Indian society needs a broader concept than caste so that large portions of Indian society are not left out of the discussion. It is my contention that the concepts ethnic group and ethnicity are apt concepts to enable an understanding of Indian society and its dynamics.

I have demonstrated in an earlier work in an Indian city in Karnataka, the utility of ethnicity as a concept in understanding the dynamics of social identities[4]. My focus on identities of language, religion, sect and caste showed the complex and often overlapping relations between these groups as also the fact that identities are contextual and do not have the same significance all the time. The dynamics of daily life are complex and I went so far as to show its linkage to social, economic and political alliances too. Before I look into the Indian case to explain my point, a brief introduction to some of the dominant views on ethnic groups would be in order.

So what do we mean by the term ethnic group and how does it help get a more comprehensive description of social dynamics. The word ethnic has roots in the Greek word *ethnikos*, the adjective of the word *ethnos* meaning a people or a nation. It emerged in the West in particular circumstances and has since been variously used in different parts of the globe. It is however now a reasonably well established term. It has evolved from its original usage to refer to outsiders or foreigners to now refer to any distinct groups within a society be they host or immigrant.

Among the more commonly acceptable description of the word ethnic has been that of Glazer and Moynihan who described ethnic groups as "all the groups in a society characterized by the distinct sense of difference owing to culture and decent"[5]. This definition highlights three important aspects of group formation namely a sense of distinctiveness, a common culture and common origins. Early American scholarship on ethnic groups and the associated self consciousness, was however, more focused on the assimilation and acculturation of various immigrant ethnic groups into the American melting pot. Ethnicity became the central focus following the so called discovery by Glazer and Moynihan in a work aptly titled *Beyond the Melting Pot –A Study of Ethnic Groups in New York* (1963), that ethnic groups do not disappear and dissolve as the years go by, instead, they become more acculturated. They are capable of renewal and transformation while still retaining their sense of identity. Focus then shifted to ethnic groups as interest groups or pressure groups.

Soviet scholarship which used the term *ethnikos* as its core term for ethnicity also recognized that "consciousness is a fundamental feature characterizing an ethnic community"[6] . Soviet scholarship stressed the first character of an ethnic group is a name or ethnonym. Each ethnic group has a distinctive ethnonym thus making self-identification as a central feature of ethnic identity. They went so far as to say that most often the name of a community and that of the language was the same. The other important features are stability and continuity. Of these the primary features of ethnicity are those which are retained when a group migrates. These include features like language, folk lore, folk art, customs etc. the reproduction of which helps migrants preserve their ethnic features in areas of new settlement. Members of an ethnic group may also have an idea of common origin. Bromley also recognizes endogamy as contributing to the stability of the group.

Soviet scholars concluded that the ethnikos interacts with social and natural factors resulting in various ethno-social organisms of (ESO). Much like American social theorists and their discovery of the persistence of ethnic groups, Soviet theorists too found that despite interacting with various political formations and social change, the core of the ethnos is retained. The persistence of ethnic groups in socialist Soviet Union surprised Soviet scholars just as it did American

scholars. The trajectory in both parts of the world forced scholars to accept the idea that a nation as it assimilates other cultures may result in a hybrid that allows for merger and yet the retention of difference.

There are other approaches to ethnicity such as that by the Scandinavian theorist Frederik Barth (1969) who focused more on the maintenance of boundaries between ethnic groups than on the content of the group's identity or the British anthropological approach which regarded tribes in urban settings as ethnic groups. We will not enter into the theoretical debate on various aspects of ethnic groups because our aim is to discuss the applicability of the broad idea of ethnic group in the Indian context. However, one key point that Barth alerts us to is that ethnic group membership must depend on ascription [by others] and self-ascription. Thus, ethnic identity is defined by others as well as self, and is often defined by self in opposition to others.

I began with stating that Indian sociology does not have an overarching conceptual scheme that treats all components of society be they religion, sect, region, language, caste, tribe and so forth at par. So how does the ethnic group concept resolve this issue? Essentially, it does so by identifying all groups based on cultural identities be they language, region, religion, caste, tribe and sect either singly or in combination and their interactions. It also recognizes that these are not to be taken as rigid identities. Not all of these identities come into play all of the time but that all individuals possess these identities and may choose to highlight one or other depending upon the social context. While the acquisition of these identities at birth led to them being termed primordial, the aspect of choice in deciding which identity to highlight at a given time led to ethnic groups being termed as instrumental identities which are used to attain a desired end.

In this context, it is worth going back to Barth whose approach to the study of ethnicity focused on the interactions and negotiations of boundaries between groups rather than on the content within. Barth stated that ethnic groups are not distinct cultural isolates to which people naturally belong. He stressed the need to move away from notions of cultures as bounded entities, and ethnicity as primordialist, replacing it with a focus on the interface and interconnectedness of ethnic identities. Barth wrote: "categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact and information, but do entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained despite changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories."[7] Furthermore, Barth accentuates that group categories – i.e. ethnic labels – will most often endure even when individual members move across boundaries or share an identity with people in more than one group. It is this interconnection that is often missing in descriptions of Indian society specially with the work that makes it seem that people live their lives only within their sub-caste or jati unit in isolation from wider society.

The capacity to draw upon one of many identities to the exclusion of others led Barth to term ethnic identities or groups as socially constructed or "situational". Ethnicity or the sense of belonging to a group uses an identity that already existed to bring together an imagined community to express an identity. There can be varied bases of collective identities that co-exist and can lead to multiple overlapping groups or distinct groups depending upon the identities that people may choose to bring into play. Thus, in defining ethnic groups Barth was not looking for a fixed list of objective attributes but for only those that the actors regard as significant. Members of any society do this all the time – sometimes engaging in contexts as citizens, devoid of ethnic group pulls and at other times as members of castes, or sects or religious or linguistic groups or a combination of some or all of them.

It is this plasticity of ethnic identities that is a character of significance in understanding social interaction and also group formation. It also needs to be kept in mind that the groups that emerge are not homogeneous in social or other senses as also in economic or occupational senses. It is this adaptability of how each person could at any given time construct their ethnic identity in a particular context that allows for ethnicity as a concept to capture the dynamic nature of society. By viewing society through this lens we can extend the description of Indian social life to cover all groups and their interconnections.

Indian sociology has not developed a theory of ethnicity but instead has a sizeable literature on ethnic markers such as language, caste, religion, tribe etc of which caste dominates all others. The utility of other ethnic markers as valid bases of group formation either singly or in combination has laregely been neglected. While the groups thus formed may be different, they function in similar manner on the basis of a shared identity. It is my contention that by treating all such ethnic groups as being at par no one group or identity gets primacy or hegemony in the descriptions that follow.

Moreover, linking ethnic group to economic, education, occupation or identities of class, helps us see other cross connections or divisions in group formation and their dynamics.

One of the earliest Indian attempts to use the term ethnic in sociology was by NK Bose in 1965. Bose used the concept to describe Calcutta. He listed various ethnic groups in the city as the Bengalis, Rajasthanis, Gujeratis, Punjabis, Sikhs etc, and the Muslims. He noted the respect for cultural differences in the city and hoped that would continue. Unfortunately Bose's usage did not result in popularizing the use of ethnic groups as a descriptor. There were however, a few other attempts to try and use the ethnic group concept in India when focusing on a single immigrant group in an urban settting and thus remaining silent about wider society and its groupings examples being Andrea Menefee Singh on Tamilians in Delhi (1976) Mythilli on Tamilians in Bombay (1974) and Bhat on Waddars(1984).

While these works were a start, there are fewer works where ethnic groups as a formulation is used to describe variation in society where immigration is not the contextual variable. One such work was by Hardgrave (1991) in his analysis of the Nadars of Tamil Nadu. He however, tended to follow the view that castes in urban areas were distinct from their rural *avatars* and behaved as ethnic groups in urban settings. Once again, there was a reluctance to extend the ethnic group idea to the rural setting. Ravinder Kaur(1986) did however link rural Jat Sikhs to ethnic groups as did Mattison Mines (1991) in his work on Tamil Muslims. Even this brief list is evidence of the fact that the word ethnic with regard to India has been used by many western scholars more so those from the US.

The lead was taken by western scholars mainly political scientists like Myron Weiner (1978), Paul Brass among others. They tended to focus on the politicization of ethnic group markers like caste or religion and language and how they are mobilized for political purposes. Weiner's sons of the soil movement and attributed the rise of ethnic movements to control over economic wealth, social status and political power. Paul Brass too was of the view that ethnicity was manipulated by the political elite for personal gains. Ethnic group politics came to be linked to interest group politics as seen in the US, with groups being based on all kinds of fabricated or real cultural constructs[8].

The politicization of language in India was inevitable given that the country was reorganized on linguistic basis soon after independence. This led to many linguistic based demands and issues on language and education and official state languages versus other languages and so forth. Das Gupta's work (1970) was an early work that linked language and ethnic identity. Das Gupta did recognize that given that there are other competing or shared ethnic markers, the stability of such groups may be deceptive. But, groups based in linguistic identity may at some moments represent the intense commitment of the group concerned. Given that languages acquired in India both a political base and cultural identity, we can still see issues with language identity across the country. Some of these are to do with the interface of language and economy in addition to language and politics and social identity. In a multi-lingual setting, which language acquires salience, which is the official language and which language(s) are good for the market and employment are all issues that have the potential to become politicized using ethnicity as the base.

Apart from language, religion, caste and tribe are other ethnic markers that have received scholarly attention. In the case of castes the idea of an overarching hierarchical integrating framework has been almost abandoned by those doing ground level studies, with more focus on inter-relations between castes on the ground level where the *jati* label is what counts. It needs to be stressed however that the category of caste in India has undergone so many changes in the last hundred years that it cannot really be used in the traditional sense of comprising a rigid composite scheme with varying ranks. The diversity of lived caste realities are reflected in major divisions emerging within the caste framework over the last century or so which signify competition rather than mutual dependence as the hallmark of caste. The creation of official categories of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes led to the creation of the more recent category Other Backward Classes (OBCs) as a grouping demanding reservation and resources based on the identity of backwardness. This and other changes in the nature of functioning of castes at the ground level have resulted in the ethnicization of caste (Fuller 1996).

The politicization of ethnic differences in India has no doubt attracted most scholarly attention with scholars like Weiner (1978), Gupta(1982) , Katzenstein (1979) and Gore (1988) all focusing on aspects of this politicization. Beteille[9] too noted the similarity between caste in India and ethnic group in America in terms of the political roles they play. In fact, Béteille went on to say that language, religion and caste increasingly act in similar ways in the context of Indian politics[10]. Weiner's focus on sons of the soil movements regards these not a result of inequality but of competition.

Gupta has however tended to regard ethnic identity in his case study of the Punjab as conspiratorial and manipulated from the top. While that may be true, it is important to realize that these political discourses are drawing upon cultural differences which exist between people in everyday life. These are real and lived identities in daily life that are not as rigid as some of these descriptions would have us believe. They are not always politicized and do not always act in isolation.

On the link between ethnic identity and tribes, it is worth noting that India has nearly 400 tribal groups which have been written about for nearly a century. Some of these groups live in close proximity to mainstream society while others may live in isolation or surrounded by other tribal communities. Tribe is a problematic category – a creation of British colonialism which has been subject to much definitional debates[11]. Given the wide diversity in the types of tribal societies in India, the ethnic group concept will prove useful in studying the core of the identity and its self definition rather than imposing rigid criteria from without as discussed by Xaxa (1999).

An analysis of ethnicity in contemporary India should focus on lived identity and its multiple layers as discussed above and move to a more inclusive and representative descriptive of social reality.

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End Notes

[1] Ghurye 1979 p.1
[2] Srinivas 1991:1
[3] ibid.2
[4] Sabharwal 2006
[5] 1975:4
[6] Bromley 1977:64
[7] Barth 1969 p.9
[8] Brass 1991 p.8
[9] Béteille 1992 p. 56
[10] Ibid.
[11] Xaxa 1999 p.1520