

SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTION OF ETHNIC BOUNDARIES: A LANGUAGE CENTRIC STUDY

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Abstract

*The Study of ethnicity is very important for proper understanding of contemporary social reality. In the third world, the tribes, villages, bands and isolated communities, which until recently survived as islands of social traditions, are today becoming integral parts of new states. These are now getting **transformed into ethnic groupings** with varying degrees of cultural distinctiveness. Social anthropologists are therefore being increasingly forced to deal with the socio-cultural and socio-political problems arising in the changed scenario. In developing nations, there seems to be a high degree of co-relation between ethnicity and politics and that is why it is essential to study the **political implications and symbolic efficacy of ethnicity**. Some scholars like Reisman, argue that in developing nations class struggles are being replaced by parochialism and ethnicity. Large masses of persons find inherited ways and old deeds “outdated” and the validity of new modes and needs uncertain, there is a sense of uprootedness which has spread throughout the societies. People in response to the sense of rootlessness tend to form ethnic groupings. As a result, ethnic conflicts have also intensified in the last decade or so. This paper aims to elaborate the **observed social causes and reality of the construction of identities** and its importance.*

Keywords: Language, ethnicity, symbols, identity, society, state (India), group, culture



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Introduction

Research on ethnicity has acquired a new significance in the post-colonial era as the **developing nations attempt to define their own identity** and their national/ethnic distinctiveness. Groups of people within these nations claim certain rights and recognition on the basis of their belonging to a certain collectivity within a country. They write their own history. An active demand for autonomy is witnessed. The near universality of multi-ethnicity in contemporary states and the cultural and structural persistence of the ethnic factors, have stimulated a great deal of research in this area. **Ethnic identities are not “given”**, these rather emerge in a dynamic social context which surcharges ethnic symbols making them politically combative. Various socio-economic and political symbols catalyze a process wherein a particular group tends to behave as an ethnic unit. This paper attempts to understand **how**

language is used to construct ethnic boundaries especially in a situation of social conflict where symbols develop a common consciousness which helps in the formation of a group. It examines the following questions:

How is language used as a symbol that distinguishes ethnic groups? From where do the groups derive their symbols? Who constructs these symbols? How do these symbols instigate / aggravate ethnic conflicts?

All the aforementioned questions are discussed in relation to the three major psychological processes that characterize formation of an ethnic group. These are: **integration, differentiation and collaboration**

The first phenomenon is that of development of identity and of consolidation of identity of a group. The second phenomena contribute to understanding of images and stereotypes, identity boundaries and the feeling of in-group and out-group. The third phenomena help us to understand inter-group conflicts and co-operation. The attempt is to see how objective the markers of identity, expressed through symbols such as language are transformed into subjective experience of the people. Symbols are “objective reality” that influences subjectivity and help to generate the subjective experience of ethnicity which results in a “consciousness of kind”. To elaborate further symbols provide meaning to a situation because of which they evoke specific emotions. The combination of meaning and emotion in the symbols have great impact on the violation of an individual or group. Cohen defines symbols as “objects” acts, concepts or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of disparate meanings⁴, evoked sentiments and emotions and impel men to action”. There is a dialectical relationship between material conditions and symbols and a similar relationship between the rational and non-rational traits in human beings; between reasons on the one hand and emotions and moral sensibility on the other.

LANGUAGE AS A SYMBOL FOR CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

Language as a symbol will be discussed here at two levels: First, it is viewed as a symbol imbued with meaning and values, used to stress an ethnic group’s distinctiveness. However, **this process is involuntary**. It is referred to as cultural symbols because it is based on traditions i.e. the shared memory of the people. At another level, the language is used as a means of mobilization and organization of an ethnic community. Here as a symbol it contributes to the political identity of the group. Hence, political identity is not given “as primordial sentiments”

but it is **created through mobilization around a central symbol**. The process is used for accentuating certain factors of differences and minimizing factors of unity. Thus as Cohen argues, these “symbol are exploited in all societies whether industrial or pre-industrial by different political interests, and their dominant symbols are thus loaded with multiplicity of political meanings. Therefore, he argues, the social scientist specializes in this political interpretation of what are essential non-political formations and activities. The cultures of ethnic groups are the universe of such originally non-political formations and activities that are politicized in the course of social conflict. It is through mobilization that ethnicity is transformed from a purely social or physiological experience into a political one.

Thus, one often sees that **ethnic movements have become one of the easiest means** of gaining political impetus in ethnically divergent societies. It is a fact that ethnically heterogeneous society has a multiplicity of traditionally autonomous centers which derive support from the respective ethnic section of the population. When the degree of subjective awareness is heightened, for instance, in a situation of conflict, members of an ethnic group may deliberately use certain cultural items to stress their separation from the rest of the society of which they are a part. Aspects of culture, reimbursed with meaning and value, lead to formation of cultural identity. It creates a feeling of internal cohesion and solidarity. An ethnic community may be mobilized for articulating political demand and for organized political action. It then constitutes a “nation” projecting an established ethnic identity into politics. Acquisition of such a political identity by an ethnic community **is not pre-ordained**. It does not flow inexorably from the cultural differences. Since the development of an ethnic community does not automatically lead to its political expression, an analytical distinction must be drawn between the two phenomena. The formation of an ethnic identity involving the use of ethnic symbols for primarily cultural purposes may be called cultural ethnicity, while its transition to a political identity may be referred to as political ethnicity. These two manifestations of ethnicity are often intertwined, though scholarly attention tends to concentrate on the political dimension only. These can occur independently. A symbol of identity is of highest importance in one ethnic community which may be ignored or interpreted quite differently by another community, depending on the underlying criteria of identity (internal and external).

The symbols are created in relation to the environment of a particular group or society. These attain an objective existence on acceptance by others in the course of social interaction within

a collectivity. **Symbols become obligatory** and, thus, exercise constraint over the individual. Ethnicity is a matter of degree. The constraint that symbols of customs exercise on the individual varies from case to case. Following Brass, we argue that objective markers of identity, like **language** are not “given” from which group identity springs, but are itself subjected to variation. Ethnic identity is not limited to any one element but consists of beliefs, practices or esthetic choices among others. The success of those who create the symbols lies in the link the forge between the individual and the collective consciousness. They make member of the group perceive that the symbols, which are the representation of a collectivity, are something that represent their individuality. At this level, the individual experiences an internal compulsion and response in ways which are similar or even identical with the responses of others. That is how **an ethnic perception consciousness and action manifest in situation**.

The criteria underlying the notion of identity has two features: Internal and external. The constraint that symbols of customs ensue on the individual varies from case to case. None of the symbols / traits by itself demarcate an ethnic Group. It is a series of overlapping and intervening features, which in their profusion and density, signify ethnic distinction. Identity is contextual, it embraces multiple levels and it changes with the environment.

Thus, ethnic boundaries play a significant role in creating certain beliefs and emotions among people who fall within these boundaries. Language as a symbol of ethnic identity, is used for construction of ethnic boundaries, as an objective mark of a group, language affects and influences the consciousness of individual members of the group.

UNDERSTANDING SYMBOLS

A thing, we say is a symbol only if a community regards it as having a referential function. The community tends to **see the symbols as instruments of expression**. (Physical, moral, economic, political) of communication of knowledge and of control in isolable changing fields of social relationships in both verbal and non-verbal communication. Simply stated we master the world through signs. Victor Turner, in his studies of symbols, tries to see the cognitive and affects meanings of symbols. Symbols are seen as three types of social processes. By “Social” we mean that it is “contextual”, that is, what it means in one society may not mean the same thing for another society. Its meaning might be viewed differently. Meaning is the result of interaction in different context as follows:

- i) **Political:** Here, we see symbols as instruments of Public control, i.e. of maintenance, distribution and exercise of power relations as a device for enabling us to make abstractions, but insists that some end must be in view.
- ii) **Ritual:** Here, symbols are most prominent and rich in concentration. The people in the rituals and objects involved may symbolize other things, by either resembling or by being associated with it in some way and then their activities may express attitude held by those when they symbolize.
- iii) **Therapeutic:** Symbols are seen as polygenic phenomena. A single symbol has many meanings. It is multi-vocal, i.e., the same “thing” mean or are made to mean, different things for different people. This is particularly the case when the “things” are shared by a large number of people in a given collectivity. Groups, that are otherwise hostile may form coalitions. It does not matter whether the things shared are religious or political symbols. The point is that the party or the person who controls the assignment of “meaning” to the things can also control the reinterpretation. The authority of these groups or person to reinterpret or maintain the meaning of symbols is traditionally assigned to them.

Symbols can be seen as creating group behavior. This could be explained by taking the example of theory of “clan totems” of Durkheim. Durkheim considered that group behavior created sentiments around symbols which help to serve, recharge, maintain and enhance collective identity.

Location of Symbols

It is in the “happenings” that we try to locate symbols. They are seen in social situation drama, cultural performances, or other social processual units. **Symbols are constructed from the cultural history of people.** According to Geertz, a culture is an inter-connected culture to be intelligent of “thickly described”. Though a study of symbolic acts, the aim is to analyze social discourse and bring out the unapparent meaning of all things. Internal relationship is understood according to the core symbol around which it is organized. Thus, the important thing to note is what the meaning of actions are and what they are trying to portray. It is through social action that cultural forms find articulation. Thus, according to Geertz, culture is the acted document and is public because meaning is public. The person is constructed out of symbols and definitions from various cultural domains.

Language is an indispensable tool for all human existence. It is the means of expressing our intricate and complex thought. It should not be seen as just a means of communication. Language must also be seen as an expression of people's way of life. It is an integral part of their collective personality. Thus, language is used more often than anything else to delimit cultural boundaries. Language is not a given trait rather it is acquired. Studies have shown that the linguistic boundaries are the most rigid things in the world today. They restrict communication in literal sense of the term. A group creates a sense of "we" and "they" among its members which unites the same kind of people and separates others. Thus a group creates an identity. Language has an important place among the bases of group identity formation. It creates unity among its speakers and also defines a line of separation from one speech community to another.

Linguistic identity is based on the objective markers of language and is expressed through demand for language. In India, for instance, group loyalty is often expressed in terms of linguistic loyalty. Indians usually identify themselves with their language not with their region. For example, when an Indian says he is an Oriya or Bengali he does not mean that he comes from the state of Orissa or Bengal but that he belongs to the Oriya and Bengali speaking community. In India, territorial or what we call regional identity continues to be strong and the people speaking a different language are called "outsiders". Therefore, most of the ethnic conflict takes place between an "insider" and "outsider". The fact that inter-regional mobility in India is extremely limited reinforces this identity. Ethnic conflict based on language give rise to what can be termed as Nativistic Movements.

A linguistic group includes people who speak the same language and related dialects. Most of the time these linguistic groups are related as ethnic groups. A linguistic group is a speech community. It is a group of people who speak either the same language or clearly related dialects, who cherish a common historical tradition and who constitute a distinct cultural group. In India, we can find 1652 languages. However, only 22 of them are recognized by the Constitution in its VIII schedule as "national language". Hence, we find that most of the languages are highly neglected and face the threat of extinction. The unrecognized linguistic communities feel deprived of a source of their legitimate identity. For those whose mother tongue is one of the 22 recognized languages their identity is defined and is reinforced mainly in linguistic terms.

A situation of conflict may take place between two different language speaking group. Due to a linguistic group's fear of losing linguistic and cultural identity. In India, language is both a divisive and cohesive force. The problem arises when it acts as a divisive force threatening the integration of the nation. Language, with the exception of religion incites the deepest emotions. Since, most of the newly developed countries, such as India, are multi-lingual, the major problem confronting these countries is integration and it is in this area that language poses serious impediments. The problem arises when a linguistically conscious people guided by political motivations preserves the state for special privileges. Thus, language has acquired an important place in the politics of regionalism. Regionalism is often expressed in linguistic terms in India. Language has a tremendous capacity for mass mobilization. A classic example is the division of one Pakistan, i.e. west and east, Pakistan into Pakistan and Bangladesh in Bengali. Although in India several languages have existed for centuries, the emergence of the language – demand on the state has become prominent only after independence. The linguistic issue was so salient that the government of India had to reorganize the states on linguistic line. Thus, in 1956 the states were re-organized and language afforded for easy re-organization. Andhra Pradesh, the state of Telugu Speech Community, was one among the states formed after the re-organization. This, in turn, gave a feeling among all cultural groups that if they do not have a home state they will become second class citizens. Those who got a home state stated feeling that they along had the right to live and prosper in their state⁵³. This would surely give rise to linguistic conflict in the fact of cross-cultural migrations. Thus, job competition and language rivalry became prominent features in independent India.

The Mulky movement is an important example where the boundary was constructed on the basis of language. In the context of the move made to separate Andhra state into Telangana and non-Telangana regions. The central argument on this issue was that language should not be seen as just a means of communication. It must also be seen as an expression of a people's way of life⁵⁴. It is an integral part of their collective personality. Therefore, imposing an alien language on an indigenous population is a political act. It is an act of aggression and domination of the indigenous population.

A Review of the Ethno-lingual Situation in India

Broadly speaking there are two linguistic models that exist in nation states. In the first instance, we have a nation-state in which there is one language, eg. French nation where French is the

language of the state. This is equally applicable to other western countries. Thus, here there is one loyalty that is loyalty to the nation as these nations are linguistically and culturally homogenous units. We have discussed earlier why such a model is inapplicable to India. Thus, India belong to the second category where nation-states have multi-lingual sub-unit or each units possessing language of its own.

The label multi-lingual as applied to these countries is comprehensive. By multi-lingualism we mean co-existence of many languages or a country containing many sub-societies each containing a different first language. Further, some of the multi-lingual countries have at most 3-4 languages spoken by the people, eg. Canada, Switzerland etc. On the contrary, there are countries with a number of languages spoken by the people. These countries mainly belong to Africa, South Asia and South-East Asia. One of the important feature of this society is that they show extremes of internal diversity in the sense that in such societies, administration, religious affairs and communicated tend to be carried on in different languages.

Roughly the multi-lingual situation of these countries can be classified into several broad patterns. In the first place, a variety of closely related languages may co-exist with one of them being accorded the status of lingua-franca, eg. Indonesian situation; secondly, there may exist a number of languages closely related of which one has literary tradition, eg. Morocco, thirdly there may be a set of unrelated languages of which no one can claim a long literary tradition, eg. the case of many African states; finally, there exists a variety of languages, each with strong literary tradition prevalent in countries of India, Pakistan, Sri Lankan, Malaysia etc. In the first and second, the multiplicity of languages does not pose any serious problem but I the last one, the problem is very serious. The geographical position of India was such that it had served as a meeting a ground for people of diverse racial, linguistic and cultural stocks. According to historian's people belonging to different races and languages, families arrived in India from different places at different times, and through their contacts, conflicts and compromises were built the unity and diversity of India. Thus, India, retains her multi-lingual and multi-religious character.

In India, a land populated by over 900 million people, scores of small speech groups consisting of a few thousand people continue to maintain their mother-tongues in everyday life.

Hundreds of languages and dialects spoken in India can be brought under four broad speech families:

(1) Aryan or Indo-European

(2) Dravidian

(3) Austro-Asiatic branch of the Austric family, the Munda, Kol and Santali

(4) Sino-Tibetan Family

The most numerous family is the Indo-Aryan. The major languages are: Assamese, Bengali, Oriya, Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Gujarati, Marathi, and Kashmiri. This is followed by Dravidian family with four major languages: Telugu, Tamil, Kanada and Malayalam. Numerically less significant family of languages are the Sino-Tibetan and Austric family of languages.

Thus, India is one of the most interesting laboratories of multi-lingual experience in the world today. Though many battles are being fought on the issues of language, it continues to be the least studied phenomena in India. Except the Census figures, Grierson's linguistic survey volumes and sporadic works of general nature like Chatterjee (1945) and Emenenu (1950, 1956) there are wide gaps to be covered in the theoretical and descriptive studies of languages in India. Recently, Emerenu has pointed out that India is a linguistic area, i.e. an area which includes languages belonging to more than one family (as represented above), but showing traits in common. These languages bear many phonological, grammatical and technical similarities, and they have a great susceptibility toward borrowing from languages of contact. S.K. Chatterjee also earlier came to a similar conclusion. Within this framework, India as a linguistic area, several linguistic areas may be carried out. For eg. Bihar, Hindi is divided in 3 dialects: Maithili, Bhojpuri and Meghai. Gumperz discusses further variations in a "regional standard" which he terms local dialect.

Varieties of Linguistic Conflict Situations

In contemporary India, there exist several types of linguistic conflict situations. The reference of the notions of in-group and out-group vary substantially; the reference could be region, language or culture independently or all these simultaneously. Given such a situation, the contending parties involve the kind of label which is most advantageous. Linguistic groups come into conflict over the control of urban economic, social and cultural scene. Much of the social tensions generated by mobilizations and counter mobilization by the "sons of the soil" (the locals) on the one hand, and outsiders and foreigners on the other. Here, language is the referent of identity to distinguish a migrant community. South Indian in Bombay; Bengalis in Guwahati, Assam; Tamils in Telugu; in migrants in Bangalore; Punjabis in Chennai etc.

There are also situations where linguistic conflict shows a regional character. In this case, the people of a particular region demand special privilege to their language and in some cases regional autonomy; Andhra linguistic movement; and Tamil movement against Hindi. Territory as an exclusive referent of identity is used mainly within homogeneous linguistic community; eg. Mulki and non Mulki in A.P., and Jodhpuri and Jaipuris in Rajasthan. There are also sub-regional linguistic conflicts within a linguistic region, eg. the Maithili movement in North Bihar against Hindi.

Linguistic conflicts also exist between states. In some cases, there is a confusion of religious elements in linguistic demands to make the base of identity more strong, eg. Punjabi language with Sikh religion in Punjab and Muslims in U.P. and Bihar etc.

The State Re-Organization Commission was appointed through government of India resolution 53/69/53 (Ministry of Home Affairs) dated 29th December 1953. The members of the Commission were Fazl ali (Chairman), M.M. Kanungo and K.M. Panikar as members. The long cherished desire of uniting all the Telugu speaking people was partly realized with the formation of Andhra state in 1953. As a result of the Martyrdom of Potti Sriramulu, who earlier went on a fast unto death demanding the creation of a separate Andhra state on linguistic basis. The support of linguistic states took are from this area, from this and agitated criteria. To find out a solution to the problem, the Government of India appointed the States Re-Organization Commission under the Chairmanship of Justice Fazal Ali. With the above observations, the importance of symbols, particularly language is evident.

CONCLUSION

As we highlighted, symbols stand as the dominant representation of one's ethnicity in the context of India. Furthermore, we were able to draw attention to the importance of language as a symbol for the expression of this very ethnicity. In contemporary times, it is important to understand the changing concept of ethnicity. This change is seen in reference to the context, circumstances and situation. Various symbols of ethnicity emerge as important in relation to the challenges and conditions faced by a particular group in a period of time. These symbols may or may not continue to be relevant once such conditions are removed. Language has continued to be relevant in the context of India and with this paper, we have attempted to understand the nature and relevance of language as a symbol of identity.

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