Silver Jubilee Lecture

ETHNICITY

MYTH, HISTORY, POLITICS

S.C. DUBE

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF
ADVANCED STUDY, SHIMLA

PROFESSOR S.C. DUBE is an internationally known social scientist. His *Indian Village*, first published in 1955, was a milestone in the study of Indian society. Professor Dube has taught social anthropology and sociology at universities in India and abroad. His professional and popular writing, in English and Hindi, has been mainly but not exclusively on matters related to social development. Professor Dube has held several positions in academic administration and was Director IIAS, Shimla from 1972 to 1977.

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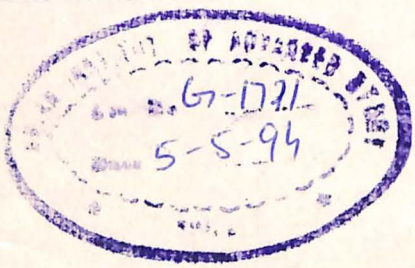

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FOREWORD

Professor S.C.Dube, a former Director of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, was among the eminent scholars who were invited to deliver special lectures as a part of the silver jubilee celebration of the Institute in 1991 and 1992. Delivered at the India International Centre, his lecture was well received, and Professor Dube kindly agreed to its publication by the Institute. He has brought his mature and perceptive scholarship to bear upon the theme of ethnicity which presents a serious problem in political, social and cultural terms the world over. Giving a lucid and profound exposition of the subject, Professor Dube comes to the conclusion that 'the structure of society, now cracking under several strains, has to be reorganized. This will involve re-thinking the notions of State and sovereignty. Perhaps we have to think in terms of a multi-layered society with appropriate degrees of autonomy at different levels. Only an interpenetrating and inter-dependent societal pattern can solve some of the problems posed by the phenomenon of ethnicity. The days of the all-powerful states are over, but smaller political units rooted in ethnicity do not appear to provide adequate and workable answers.'

This essay should be welcome to the scholar and the public person alike.

1 September, 1993.
Rashtrapati Nivas, Shimla.

J.S. GREWAL

ETHNICITY: MYTH, HISTORY, POLITICS

The contemporary discourse on humankind, society, and the future has gathered a new set of words and symbols, metaphors and patterns. Many of these are highly charged and emotive. Because of new modes of awareness several concepts and notions have been rescued from attics or basements, dusted off, and invested with new meanings and values. Discarded primordialities have been revived and reinstated. The rejects of the past have been set up as the idols of the present. It looks as though the movement of history gets into reverse motion at unanticipated points; upsetting, in the process, the pathways to cherished goals and the paradigms sustaining them. The diverse manifestations of ethnicity and associated phenomena are a case in point.

At a time when humankind was getting used to the concept of homogenization, to the notion of a "global village", and to the ideology of "one planet, one humanity", the sudden outburst of ethnic phenomena was profoundly disturbing. Nation-states that were seeking larger unities – a European Community with soft frontiers, for example – were dismayed by what was happening around them. They had pockets of discontent that were likely to blow up. The Soviet Union and the East European states – bastions of communism, the ideology that had apparently solved the problems of nationalities and ethnic minorities – had forebodings of impending ethnic strife. Time has proved that those warning signals were not false alarms. Despite substantial organizational effort to bring about African unity, tribal ethnicities have proved too strong to be contained. North, Central, and South America have their own ethnic problems, with simmering discontent that reaches boiling point occasionally.

Nearer home, in Asia, there is evidence of fratricidal wars and attempted genocide. China remains largely inscrutable; but the happenings in Tibet have been widely publicized, and there are indications that all is not quiet in the Muslim-dominated areas of

southern China. The rise of the Islamic crescent over Xinjiang – formerly known as Sinkiang – has caused concern and misgivings in China. This Autonomous Region was dominated by people of Turkic origin who have ethnic affinities with the populations of neighbouring regions: Afghanistan, the tribal areas of north-western Pakistan, Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, and a substantial part of north-western China. These groups were divided by state boundaries but remained united by religious and cultural bonds. Now China fears that they may seek political unity also. In 1950 Xinjiang's ethnic profile was: Uygur 75 per cent, Kazak 10 per cent, Han 5 per cent, and eleven other minor tribes 8 per cent. All except the Han – the ruling ethnic group in China – were followers of Islam. Its autonomous status notwithstanding, the region was subjected to a relentless process of Hannization. Because of state-encouraged immigration, the Han share of the population had risen by 1982 to 40 per cent. In a total population of 13 million the Uygur constituted 6 million and the Han, 5 million. Though the role of religion in national life was recognized after the death of Mao Zedong and the erosion of the influence of the Gang of Four, Islamic assertions disturbed the rulers of China, who imposed several restrictions. Muslims under the age of eighteen were forbidden participation in religious activities, including offering of prayers in mosques: nor could they attend Islamic schools. The use of the Arabic script for the Turkic languages was discouraged and the use of a Romanized alphabet was ordered. The reaction of the Muslim population to the family limitation policies of the Chinese government was very unfavourable. As a special favour Muslim couples in towns were allowed to have two children each and those in rural areas, three. The average family size among them is relatively large: among the Uygur it is seven, although couples with ten children are not uncommon. The Muslim population began articulating its solidarity with the rest of the Islamic world: it condemned the Soviet Union for its occupation of Afghanistan, criticized Israel for its repression in Palestine, and began speaking in the name of China's eleven million Muslims. Simmering discontent occasionally provoked armed revolt, but so far each such episode has been militarily suppressed.

Consider the emerging ethnic situation in the tiny Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, a medieval curiosity in the modern age. Tensions between the Drukpa (native Buddhist Bhutanese) and subjects of Nepalese origin are mounting; and they may embroil India also, as some 25,000 Bhutanese of Nepalese origin have taken shelter in Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. Even the population figures are misleading. According to the 1988 census the population of the kingdom was 1.37 million: 48 per cent Bhutanese Buddhists, 45 per cent Nepalese, and 7 per cent others. Another census was ordered in 1989 to whitewash these figures. This operation put the total population at 700,000, of whom only 28,000 ethnic Nepalese were recognized as Bhutanese citizens, the rest being treated as illegal immigrants. The Drukpa are determined to maintain their political and cultural dominance. In the 150-member Assembly the Nepalese have only 14 out of 105 elected members. Twelve Buddhist monks are nominated by the religious hierarchy, and 33 are nominated by the government. Buddhist monks have great influence in the Royal Court. A section of them is striving to promote better relations with Tibet, even at the cost of Bhutan's relations with India. It is true that Nepalese immigrants are entering Bhutan in large numbers, as they earlier entered Sikkim and Darjeeling and some other districts of West Bengal. The Bhutanese government has issued thirty injunctions regarding dress, hair style, social customs, and the use of the official Dzongka language. Failure to abide by them can result in the imposition of fines and imprisonment and even in the loss of citizenship. The ethnic Nepalese are not taking it lying down: the Bhutan People's Party has launched a well-planned agitation and the Ngolop guerrillas have mounted a violent operation. They have at their disposal huge quantities of sophisticated arms and explosives. It is difficult to foresee the shape of things in the Dragon Kingdom: all one can say is that more turbulent times are ahead.

In the island state of Sri Lanka the great divide between the Sinhalas and the Tamils has already taken a heavy toll, and the light at the end of the tunnel cannot yet be seen. Perhaps the Veddas and the Moors also have their problems, but because of their minuscule size they have not been able to articulate them with impact-making force.

Bangladesh has not been able to resolve its Hindu-Muslim conflict; the Chakma and other hill tribes, some of them Buddhists, continue to be exploited and pushed around.

In Myanmar (Burma) ethnic identities are well developed. In 1981 the country had a population of 35.3 million people: 28.3 million Burmans, 3.14 million Shan, 1.55 million Arakanese, and 2.4 million Karen and smaller tribal groups like the Kachin, the Chin, and the Wa. Some of these ethnic groups have strong political and military organizations. There are internecine wars among them and between them and the central authority. The Shan, Arakanese, Karen, Mon, Kachin, Chin, and Wa have strong ethnic identities and substantial autonomy, and their bonds with the central authority, even in the past, were fragile and mostly notional. The political map of this country is more a myth than a reality: the tribal regions of the north are only notionally a part of Myanmar. A feature of pre-British ethnicity in Burma was the relative ease with which ethnic identities could be changed. New affiliations were developed when people moved from upland to the lower delta regions.

In Malaysia the three major contending groups are the Malays, the Chinese, and the Indians (mostly Tamils); but the Orang Asali aboriginal groups in the forests and the Thai Muslims in the north also pose complex ethnic problems. In Kelantan, believed to be a bastion of Malay culture and orthodox Islam, there is a strong order of monks practising Theravad Buddhism. In Sarawak ethnic identities are confused by names given by outsiders and by self-labelling. For example, the groups described by anthropologists as "Sea Dayak" and "Land Dayak" now call themselves Iban and Bidayuh respectively. The label Melanau was wrongly given to a people who were traditionally referred to as the A Liko – the people of the river. Confusion in the use of the term Murut is worse. Though it was not used in self-reference by the groups themselves, this label has been given to diverse sections of mountain peoples – to two culturally dissimilar groups in Borneo, to separate groups in Sabah who call themselves Timungan, Nabay, Baukan, Paluan, Sumambuq, and Arumbis, and to the Lun Bawang people of Sarawak.

Indonesia has island ethnic identities, besides a sizeable Chinese population and several tribal groups. In addition, the people of Bali

practise their own brand of Hinduism. In the Philippines, besides the Catholics, there is a sizeable presence of Moros, who are Muslims. Several tribal groups are scattered over many islands. Many of these ethnic identities are strong and from time to time they cause considerable turbulence.

In the more than four decades of its independence India has had to face several kinds of ethnic movements of considerable power. The Tamil movement, initially with separatist overtones, was compounded of putative racial affinity and commonness of language and culture. Movements for the creation of linguistic states in other parts of India did not play the racial card, but they were based on language and regional culture. The turbulence in the north-east, especially Naga and Mizo insurgency, came about when independent ethnic (tribal) groups did not perceive a common past and a common destiny with the rest of India. Other ethnic movements among the tribes – Jharkhand and Bodoland are examples – stop at demanding separate statehood within the Indian Union and have used varying degrees of violence to attain their objectives. The Jharkhand movement is at present eschewing bloodshed and has even incorporated those *dikus* (outsiders) who are long-term residents in the region. But the threat of violence is there. ULFA adopted the path of militancy and terrorism, and there are dormant sub-nationalisms awaiting their turn to get into the arena of conflict. The Gorkhaland agitation was built, as its name indicates, around Gorkha ethnic identity. Its perception of the problems of the ethnic Nepalese in India differs from that of the leadership in Sikkim, and so do their political strategies.

Islamic fundamentalism has set in motion religion-based movements in several pockets of India. The Hindu response has been counter-fundamentalism in the form of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and its militant allies and wings like the Shiv Sena, the Bajrang Dal, and the Trishul Sena. The Sikh movement in Punjab represents disenchantment with political processes and is built around a perception of threats to Sikh religion, language, and culture. In Assam a strong movement was generated because of the fear of loss of cultural identity, as the state was seen as being overrun by non-Assamese "outsiders". This inventory of ethnic movements is not