Language and Ethnic Identity
The Context of Jharkhand Movement

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Social movements are viewed as a conscious collective effort of the people of any given society or a segment of it to promote or resist change in the social structure. The collective effort of the people turns into a social movement when there is collective mobilization. In this sense the prime object of sociology of social movements becomes the study of the nature of collective mobilization. In a very broad and generalized manner, it can be stated that people get mobilized when there are certain issues pertaining to which they feel a sense of relative deprivation. In the words of T.R. Gurr (1970: 13), 'discontent arising from the perception of relative deprivation is the basic, instigating condition for participants in collective violence.' ('Collective violence' may be considered as a form of collective mobilization leading to social movements.)

In a hierarchically arranged society, naturally, we witness a relative abundance of such issues stemming from the differential access which people have to the source of social, economic, political and cultural resources.

Ethnic movements, to use Devalle's (1992:14) terminology, 'ethnic based movements' have their roots in people's perception of relative deprivation especially in the cultural domain. In such movements ethnicity plays an important role in mobilizing the people. As a process, ethnicity helps in the development of the ethnic identity of a group of people in comparison and contrast to that of the 'other'. The process of group identity formation on the basis of ethnicity primarily takes into consideration the real or putative attachment of the people with their respective cultural parameters like, customs, food habits, language, blood ties, kinship affinity, community feeling etc. Which one, or the combination of these, will form the core of ethnic identity of a group, ultimately depends upon the dynamics of

the particular historical context in which the identity of the 'other' group is formed. So, it is all about inter-group relationship when we refer to the process of the formation of ethnic identity. This relationship assumes a conflictual overtone whenever the different ethnic groups are placed, or ranked differentially, in the system of social stratification. Hechter (1978) approaches this issue by using the concept of cultural division of labour. According to him, 'whenever individuals having different cultural markers (in this case ethnicity) are distributed through an occupational structure a cultural division of labour is thereby formed.' In such a case ethnic boundaries tend to coincide with the patterns of structural differentiation and the resultant inequalities. In this environment, group mobilization on the basis of the ethnic dimensions mentioned above takes place. This can be regarded as the genesis of ethnic movements.

The purpose of the present paper, however, is to examine the nature of the process of ethnic identity formation in Jharkhand as expressed through the movement for a separate statehood covering some portion of the central Indian plateau. In particular, attempt has been made to analyze the role of language in the construction of ethnic identity in Jharkhand.

Here we are to ascertain the role of language in the construction of ethnic identity, and the consequent generation of ethnic conflict. Language is an essential and integral core of culture. According to John Rex (1997)

Language is a means of ensuring communication within the group but it is also more than this. Language makes thought possible and, in doing so, not merely describes the world; but also interprets and evaluates it, and the shared evaluations which are implicit in it constitute an important bond between those speaking the same language, beyond the bonds created by other ties.

Thus, the pattern of social interaction and relationships of any society is reflected by the language spoken by its people. In doing so language helps develop inter-human communication system, which results into the formation of social groups. The social groups, thus formed, try to maintain the sanctity of their languages as they speak about their heritage, tradition etc. In this manner, language becomes the all-important factor in group identity formation, whether small or large, ethnic or in terms of nationality. However, with respect to the development and maintenance of ethnic identity, language perhaps plays the most crucial role. In any conflictual inter-ethnic

relationship, there is always a tendency of the privileged or dominant ethnic group to de-legitimize the cultural symbol of the subjugated ethnic group while the subjugated one tries to legitimize it through the members' conscious effort at preserving, maintaining and glorifying their cultural elements. In this attempt and counter-attempt, language as the most tangible dimension of culture, proves to be instrumental. The dominant groups of any society try to build up and reproduce their socio-cultural hegemony over the dominated ones by imposing their languages which, having the official recognition of the respective states, tends to ignore altogether the existence of other non-dominant languages. This can result in either the forcible assimilation of all the peripheral, marginal culture and languages into the dominant ones, or the renewal of vigour on the part of the dominated groups to consolidate their intra-group network by upholding their cultural symbols, most importantly language. Inglehart and Woodward (1972: 360) also mention these possibilities as they argue,

> where a dominant group holds the positions of power at the head of the major bureaucracies in a modern society, and gives preference in recruitment to those who speak the dominant language, any submerged group has the options of assimilation, non-mobility or group-resistance.

As we are witnessing in almost all the multilingual nation-states, the trend is certainly not in accordance with the assimilationist paradigm. Instead, amidst the global homogenizing tendency of the post-modern world, the small group-or local-identities are coming into prominence. Putting emphasis on their specific cultural and linguistic heritage, these groups are resisting the onslaught of what can be termed as linguistic imperialism.

The Jharkhand movement, as we know it today, has its legacy in the Adivasi uprisings of the second half of the 18th century when the colonial rule began to unfold itself in India. British colonial agrarian policy resulted in severe economic exploitation of the indigenous peasantry of Jharkhand. The Permanent Settlement Regulations Act of 1793, added some new dimension in it by creating a new class of landlords. These landlords, unlike their counterparts in pre-British India, did not have any organic relationship with the peasantry. Being educated and mostly settled in the towns, these absentee landlords did not have any idea of agriculture. Their only interest in agriculture was in the collection of rent. These 'parasitic land owning class', to use AR Desai's (1966) phrase, proved very

detrimental to the cause of the peasantry as well as agriculture. The entry of these new landlords, who were mostly people from outside the Jharkhand region, added further to economic exploitation of the people and prepared a ground for cultural conflict. The alien colonial policy, by undermining the traditional social, economic, political and cultural institutions of the indigenous communities, developed a sense of cultural submergence in their mind. Arvind N Das (1992; 89) most succinctly points it out when he argues,

> Derision of their way of life on the assumption that it is 'primitive'; active subordination, or, at best, callous neglect, of their languages and traditions; domination over their religious and social mores through invidious extension of the so-called Great Tradition—all these represent the attempted cultural conquest of the Adivasis.

This gradually resulted, and got crystallized, in the shape of 'we-they' contradiction in their perception. This can be considered as a take-off point of the process of ethnic identity formation in Jharkhand.

The 'we-they' contradiction in the cultural realm gives birth to ethnic conflict. In order to analyze the nature of this contradiction in Jharkhand, we should explore the meaning of the term 'diku'. The word 'diku' in Adivasi parlance means the outsiders. The outsiders are those who are culturally different from the Adivasis and who maintain a considerable social distance from them. According to SC Sinha (Sinha et al 1969), by the term 'diku' the uneducated Adivasis refer to, 'all non-Adivasis who speak language other than Adivasi dialects, and so on.' Although the term later on adopted the factor of economic exploitation by the outsiders into its fold, still we can assert that its originality lies in its cultural construction. Among other variables, the factor of language is stressed here to designate the cultural 'other'.

The process of ethnic identity formation in Jharkhand reached its climax during the entire span of the 20th century. This period witnessed the introduction of formal politics in Jharkhand. Several political and social reform organizations came up during this period with the avowed aim of improving the socio-economic and cultural plight of the Adivasis of Jharkhand. The major organizations of this period to take up these issues were:

1.   Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj (1915)
2.   Adivasi Mahasabha (1938)
3.   Jharkhand Party (1950)
4.   Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (1972)

Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj was the first organization in the history of the Jharkhand movement to highlight the cause of the distinctive identity of the Adivasis. Being heavily influenced by the Christian missionaries, this organization tried relentlessly to maintain and protect the cultural boundary of the Adivasi society. To achieve its objective, the organization placed a memorandum to the Simon Commission in 1928 demanding the separation of Chotanagpur from Bihar and Orissa. This may be regarded as the first attempt to create a separate Jharkhand state, as we know of it today. Although the demand was turned down, the contribution of the 'Samaj' in upholding the cause of cultural identity and specificity of the Adivasis cannot be ignored. A considerable effort was made by the 'Samaj' to infuse fresh blood into some of the decadent Adivasi languages and dialects. The influence of Christianity is worth mentioning in this context. Christianity imparted a sense of identity among the Adivasis of Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas (the present day Jharkhand) and it was primarily under its influence that many Adivasi languages were written in the Roman script. Despite the fact that Christianity was responsible in creating cleavages among the Adivasis on religious terms, still its contribution in shaping the Adivasi linguistic identity should not be underestimated.

The period of Adivasi Mahasabha and Jharkhand Party was the golden period of the Jharkhand movement. It was in this period that the ethnic identity of the people of Jharkhand was asserted most vibrantly through the demand of a separate Jharkhand state within the limits of the Federal Republic of India. In fact, in the 1940s and 1950s, movement for a separate Jharkhand state became coterminus with 'probably the most dynamic of the identity movements in middle India ... the one based on the Santali script 'OL Chiki', fashioned by Pandit Raghunath Murmu (1905), (KS Singh 1982).

The invention of the script was no doubt a major step towards the protection of the Adivasi linguistic identity. Although there was some hesitation to accept the Santhali script on the part of the other Adivasi communities of the region, gradually it came to be accepted as the script of all the languages of the Mundari group. The script in this way acted as an integrating mechanism and provided a fillip to the ethnic feeling of the people by lending it a definite shape and direction. As a result of this, the ethno-lingual consciousness of the people of Jharkhand rose to such an extent that it came to be featured in the agenda of the Adivasi Mahasabha. According to BP Mahapatra (1979) the objectives of the movement under the Adivasi Mahasabha included,

... the establishment of a separate province for the aboriginal tribes of Chotanagpur within the framework of the Government of India, the representation of the aboriginal tribe in the state cabinet of Bihar by at least one educated aboriginal, and the introduction of Santali and other aboriginal languages as the media of instruction in the schools.

The Jharkhand Party almost echoed the same sentiment. LK Mahapatra (1982), while going through the statement of objectives of the Jharkhand Party in Orissa, remarks,

The adivasis have their own culture and language. Neither Oriya, for instance, nor Bengali, is their mother tongue. So they claim that they should not be deprived of enriching their own culture and language...

On the basis of this aroused ethnic awareness, particularly on linguistic account, the Jharkhand Party submitted a memorandum to the States Reorganization Commission (SRC), which in the mid 1950s, was considering realignment of the politico-administrative units in the country on linguistic basis. The SRC in its report (1955), however, rejected the case of a separate Jharkhand state. Among many other reasons put forward by the report favouring its decision, the facts of the absence of a link language and the minority status of the Adivasis in Jharkhand acquired distinct significance due to its impact on the future course of the movement. It was true that at the time of reorganization of states on linguistic basis, the people of Jharkhand did not have any lingua franca. But the process of developing a link language in such a diversified multilingual country like India is quite complicated. Even after the reorganization, no state in India is fully unilingual. The separatist demands (many of them on linguistic account) for further bifurcation and realignment of the existing states in India at present may serve as pointers here.

Regarding the point of the minority status of the Adivasis in Jharkhand region, it can be stated that the demand for a separate Jharkhand state was raised by the Adivasis as well as the non-Adivasis of the region. In fact, Jharkhand can be conceived of as 'mini India' where people from various regions, religions, cultures, languages and races have joined hands together to develop a composite culture. In the words of Ram Dayal Munda (1989), an intellectual of the Jharkhand movement and the ex-Vice Chancellor of Ranchi University,

Culturally this is the only area in the entire country where three major cultural streams—Aryan, Dravidian and Austoasian, represented through various languages—have converged to create a cultural synthesis of its own kind.

The argument tends to cancel the issue concerning the minority status of the Adivasis.

The refusal of the SRC in granting statehood to Jharkhand had a great impact on the issue of regeneration of Adivasi languages and scripts, and consequently, on the future of the movement. Added with the prevailing economic pressure, this became instrumental in the forcible emigration of a large number of poor Adivasis to nearby states and urban areas, where they were fast forgetting their language as well as the sense of identity. The unity on linguistic account, which was developing fast, started to degenerate due to the frustration caused by the report. This is evident from the fall in the language retention ratio from 78 in 1971 to 70 in 1981 among the Adivasis of Bihar, as mentioned by LM Khubchandani (1997). The cases of the adivasis in the other states, viz. Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal, which include the Jharkhand region, are almost the same with the only exception of Orissa. This fall in the rate of speakers of Adivasi language can be attributed to the growing tendency of the Adivasis to be socialized by the social and cultural values of the dominant Indian mainstream. In the urban areas of Jharkhand the situation has reached such an extent that Devalle (1992: 177) remarks, "... some of the educated adivasis feel uncomfortable when using their own language." This would not take much time in spilling over to the rural areas of Jharkhand, mostly illiterate. This ominous trend of cultural submergence was responsible for the alienation of the Adivasis from their tradition and heritage and it alienated them from their lived universe lifeworld. In the words of Sajal Basu (1994: 33),

> This cultural destitution, precipitated by the dominant regional cultures in the area, has been instrumental in loss of original languages and culture of the indigenous people.

Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), from its inception in 1972, was concerned with the integration of the dominated ethnic groups of Jharkhand with that of the exploited peasantry and the working class of the region. The leadership of the Morcha related the ethnic oppression of the Jharkhandis with that of their class exploitation. In this way, although the Morcha became successful in broadening the social base of the movement, over-inclination of the leadership towards the class solidarity thesis debarred them from concentrating on the phenomenon of cultural degeneration going on in the societal sphere. As a result of this, the movement failed to peak under JMM, which it had once done as a result of the unity of the indigenous

people that stemmed from their ethnic awareness based on linguistic ground. The JMM got fragmented into several factions after some initial success. Turning away from the path of resistance, since the 1980s, the movement fell into the trap of narrow electoral politics due to poor moral commitment of the leadership towards the movement and its causes. Corrupt political understanding and adjustment of the leaders for their personal gain, alienated the general people farther from the movement. During this period in Jharkhand, there were several regional (Jharkhand) political organizations but there was no movement. Yet, in such a situation of total hopelessness, the state of Jharkhand was created on 15th November 2000. The reasons behind the creation, in a situation when there was no trace of the movement at all, should be attributed to the *unjust electoral political arithmetic of profit and loss* in which all the established political organizations of the region were engaged. Paradoxically enough, the people of Jharkhand reluctantly accepted it, while the *diku's* expressed their joys over it.

The recent declining trend of the movement, however, should not be considered as its perpetual degeneration. As the manifestations of conflictual collective action of the members of a society, or a segment of it, social movements have their relative permanence like society itself. The omnipresence of conflict results in the construction of the basis of society, as well as social movement, as two distinct and independent realities. The immanent intermittent nature of conflict is responsible for making social movements prominent at times, and dormant at the other. Rajendra Singh (2001: 139) considers this to be quite a normal feature of any social movement. He says, 'In their natural course, movements often suffer disintegration only to rise again, possibly in another time and at another place.' This is equally true for the Jharkhand movement. The weak state of the movement at present is accountable to the people's gradual detachment from their culture and tradition. The erosion of ethnic identity of the people of this region, as expressed by the declining language retention ratio among the Adivasi language speakers, increasing tendency of bilingualism and multilingualism resulting into even the shift in mother tongue among the Adivasis, are the most concrete reasons for the loss of vigour and vibrancy of the movement at present. But there are also signs of resurgence against all these odds. In a field study conducted by the present researcher in some villages and towns of East Singbhum district, Jharkhand during 2001-2002, to enquire into the nature of the movement, certain

revealing facts came out. Almost 66 per cent of the participants of the movement still have Adivasi languages, mostly Santhali, as their mother tongue. Not less than 60 per cent of the participants are demanding Santhali to be the official language of the newly formed state and this figure rises upto 73 per cent if the total respondents (participants and non-participants taken together) are taken into consideration. These facts, coupled with the efforts of some organizations, most prominently, Santhali Bhasa Morcha (an organization for the promotion of the cause of official recognition of Santhali language) most prominently indicates that there is a tendency towards the reassertion of the linguistic identity that, at times, lifted the movement to a point of glory. For the people, hence, the regeneration of their ethnic identity on linguistic account should be the only way to achieve their long-cherished aspirations of liberty, equality and, of course, autonomy.

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