

IDENTITY POLITICS IN INDIA: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: *Identity politics emerged as a scholarly inquiry in social science and humanities mainly in the second half of the twentieth century in the form of multiculturalism, women's movement, Dalit and Adivasi movements, civil rights, lesbian and gay movements, separatist movements, and violent ethnic and nationalist movements in different parts of the world. The very claim of their movement emanates perhaps from the injustices done to them regarding their social position, vulnerability, marginalization, oppression by the so called cultural imperialism. However, it is in this context that the paper tries to analyze how identity politics developed in different scholarships particularly in social sciences and humanities and how different approaches define the process of identity formation. Along with this the paper examines identity politics in India in terms of caste, tribe, language, religion, region and ethnicity and explains how far and to what extent these identity markers pose a challenge to the unity and integrity of the nation.*

Key Words: *Caste; Ethnicity; Identity Politics; Language; Religion; Region.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Identity politics has become a prominent subject of politics and political activities all over the world today. Identity politics as an aspect of movements and struggles for recognition is an important part of our contemporary world. In recent years, scholars working in a remarkable array of social science and humanities disciplines have taken an intense interest in questions concerning identity. Within political science, for example, we find the concept of "identity" at the center of lively debates in every major subfield. In comparative politics, "identity" plays a central role in work on nationalism and ethnic conflict (Horowitz 1985; Smith 1991; Deng 1995;), in international relations, the idea of "state identity" is at the heart of constructivist critiques of realism and analyses of state sovereignty (Wendt 1992; Wendt 1999; Katzenstein 1996; Lapid and Kratochwil 1996; Biersteker and Weber 1996), and in political theory, questions of "identity" mark numerous arguments on gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, and culture in relation to liberalism and its alternatives (Young 1990; Connolly 1991; Kymlicka 1995; Miller 1995; Taylor 1989).

The term identity politics is widely used throughout the social sciences and the humanities to describe phenomena as diverse as multiculturalism, the women's movement, civil rights, lesbian and gay movements, separatist movements in Canada and Spain, and violent ethnic and nationalist conflict in postcolonial Africa and Asia, as well as in the formerly communist countries of Eastern Europe (Bernstein 2005:47).

Identity has a prominent subject for scholarly inquiry for a long time and since the second half of the 20th century. By and large, identity of any sort is constructed on the basis of sameness and a sense of continuity. Distinct notions of identity are crystallized when the difference between the 'self' and the 'other' becomes very conspicuous. The identification of a member of the group on the basis of sharing common attributes on the basis of all or some of the attributes, language, gender, religion, culture, ethnicity etc. indicates the existence or formation of identity. The mobilization on the basis of these markers is called identity politics. However, it is in this context that the paper makes an attempt to highlight on the historical background of identity politics along with different approaches interrogating the process of identity formation including primordialist, instrumentalist, modernist and postmodernist. Highly focusing on the theoretical perspective of identity politics the paper goes on to examine identity politics in India most specifically in terms of caste, tribe, language, religion, region and ethnicity and explains how far and to what extent these identity markers pose a challenge to the unity and integrity of the nation.

2. A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF IDENTITY POLITICS

In order to understand the historical background of identity politics, let's start first with the concept of identity as the nature of identity is central in understanding identity politics.

The fundamental paradox of identity is inherent in the term itself. From the Latin root *idem*, meaning "the same", the term nevertheless implies both similarity and difference. On the one hand, identity is something unique to each of us that we assume is more or less consistent (and hence the same) over time. For instance ...there is an intense

debate in the U.K. about the government's proposed introduction of identity cards and their potential for addressing the problem of "identity theft". In these formulations, our identity is something we uniquely possess: it is what distinguishes us from other people. Yet on the other hand, identity also implies a relationship with a broader collective or social group of some kind. When we talk about national identity, cultural identity, or gender identity, for example, we imply that our identity is partly a matter of what we share with other people. Here, identity is about identification with others whom we assume are similar to us (if not exactly the same), at least in some significant ways (Buckingham 2008:1).

Meanwhile, the usage of identity was adopted throughout humanities and social science disciplines as scholars sought alternatives to mass society and relative deprivation approaches to explain race, class, gender, sexuality, and other uprisings occurring around the world in the 1960s and 1970s (Klandermans 1992; Brubaker and Cooper 2000). But as a regular usage of the term in the discipline of social science did not appear until the advent of New Social Movement theories, which characterized identity as a construction occurring both at individual and collective level and as fluid, multiple and unstable (Melluci 1989; Touraine 1981).

Identity is best understood as a process, rather than a thing. Each day we are involved in the practice of 'identification': ascribing names and labels to people and things. Identities are both contingent and organized and predictable. Judith Butler expresses this insight well in her notion of 'performativity'¹ as a 'practice of improvisation within a sense of constraint' (Butler 2004:1).

Identity politics, on the other hand, is perhaps a more recent concept. It has been used in political and academic discourses since the 1970s. Identity politics is a phenomenon that arose first at the radical margins of liberal democratic societies in which human rights are recognized, and the term is not usually used to refer to dissident movements within single-party or authoritarian states. The elements of identity politics can be seen to be present in many of the earliest statement of feminists, ethnic movements and gay and lesbian liberation. One of the examples of it can be found in the Combahee River Collective Statement² of April 1977, claims to have coined the term 'identity politics'. However, in its academic use especially in social sciences and humanities, it was first introduced by Renee R. Anspach in 1979 to define, 'social movements which seek to alter the selfconceptions and societal conceptions of their participants' (Anspach 1979:765).

The second half of the twentieth century saw the emergence of large-scale political movements-second wave feminism, Black Civil Rights in the U.S., gay and lesbian liberation, and the American Indian movements, for example- based in claims about the injustices done to particular social groups. These social movements are undergirded by and foster a philosophical body of literature that takes up questions about the nature, origin and future of the identities being defended. Identity politics as a mode of organizing is intimately connected to the idea that some social groups are oppressed; that is, that one's identity as a woman or a Native American, for example, makes one peculiarly vulnerable to cultural imperialism (including stereotyping, erasure, or appropriation of one's group identity), violence, exploitation, marginalization, or powerlessness (Young 1990). Identity politics starts from analyses of oppression to recommend, variously, the reclaiming, redescription, or transformation of previously stigmatized accounts of group membership.

3. APPROACHES TO IDENTITY FORMATION

Contemporary approaches to identity treat the concept as flexible and continually changing due to unstable political, social and ideological environments and the inner development of local communities (Turner 2006; Bazin & Selim 2006; Bennett 2007). Recent theories interpret identity as discourse (Bhabha 2000; Chun 2005; Doja 2006; Gannon 2006), plastic, variable, complex, reflexive (Cohen 1995; Ortner 2005; Luhmann 2006), multi-local, contemporary (Marcus 1998; Portis-Winner 2002), close to the native point of view (Geertz 2001 [1973]; Marcus & Fischer 1999) and subjective (Derrida 2000).

However, regarding the formation or construction of identity, some dominant approaches have been developed in the disciplines of humanities and social science like primordialist, instrumentalist, modernist, and postmodernist. Let us see how these approaches define the process of identity construction.

The primordial theory is the oldest theory of ethnic identity in the sociological and anthropological literature. Three arguments exist at the core of this theory. First, ethnic identity is an ascribed identity or assigned status that is inherited from one's ancestors. Secondly, ethnic identity is fixed and permanent. Thirdly, common descent and history provide the foundation for ethnic identity formation. Hence, common biological, historical and cultural origins link people together ethnically (Isajiw 1999; Jenkins 1996; Yang 2000). Schermerhorn (1970:2) states that it is based on "real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements". Examples of symbolic characteristics include kinship, religious affiliations, place of origin, language, or dialect, tribal affiliations, phenotypical features, or any combination of these. Roosens (1994:84) affirms that ethnic identity can be best defined as a "feeling of belonging and continuity in being (staying

the same person(s) through time) resulting from an act of self ascription and/or ascription by others to a group of people” (Cited in Chiu 2003:41).

A major critique of this approach is that it represents a very static and naturalistic viewpoint of identity. It does not take into account culture process and other societal factors that manipulate or formulate ethnic communities. The instrumentalist approach, in contrast believes that “ethnicity is socially constructed and people have the ability to cut and mix from a variety of ethnic heritages and cultures to form their own individual or group identities” (Hutchison and Smith 1996:9). Instrumentalist approach has been characterized as concerned with the role of ethnicity in the mediation of social relations and the negotiation of access to resources, primary economic and political resources. In other words, this approach views identity as an instrument or strategic tool to gain access to resources, services, and rewards that cannot be obtained if one does not claim to be in a particular identity.

The origin of instrumentalist movement has been tied to the work of Fredrik Barth (1969) and Abner Cohen (1974). Barth viewed ethnic identity as an “individualistic strategy” in which individuals move from one identity to another to “advance their personal economic and political interests, or to minimize their losses” (Cited in Jones 1997:74). In contrast to Barth, Cohen (1974) “placed greater emphasis on the ethnic group as a collective organized strategy for the protection of economic and political interests” (ibid.). Ethnic groups share common interests, and in pursuit of these interests they develop “basic organizational functions: distinctiveness or boundaries; communication; authority structure; decision making procedure; ideology; and socialization” (Cohen 1974:xvi-xvii).

The major critique of instrumentalist approach is that it falls into a reductionist mode of explanation whereby ethnicity is defined in terms of the observed regularities of ethnic behavior in a particular situation and the reduction of ethnicity to economic and political relationships frequently results in the neglect of the cultural dimensions of ethnicity.

The very paradigm of modernity relies heavily on the idea of universal reason and of social progress achievable through advances in knowledge, as illustrated by the “grand narratives” (or “*grands récits*”, to use Jean-François Lyotard’s terms) of the Western world. However, as Lyotard himself points out in *The Postmodern Condition*, the two types of “*grands récits*” (the “narratives of emancipation” and the “speculative narratives”) cannot be used to justify scientific research since there is no direct causal relationship between knowledge and social progress. Such a position is in keeping with both Lyotard’s own doubts about the idea of progress and the characteristic postmodern skepticism about the possibility of social engineering. In other words, the metanarratives of modernity have one major flaw: they aim – along the lines of the Enlightenment and of Western philosophical traditions – to define a generic human nature and destiny without taking into account the individual, the particular, the local, the different, the Other (Dumitrescu 2001:11)

Regardless of its commendable emancipatory aims, such a discourse can only “read” the reality of the Other against a transcendental, rational (and some would add white, male, Eurocentric) subject which is, paradoxically, the very centre or source (of power, of meaning) and at the same time outside time and space – an abstraction or essence transcending any physical boundaries. This is a reduction that leaves out some of the basic components of human identity (such as race, ethnicity, and gender) and makes possible a notion of the human subject as a unified, immutable, coherent entity. From such a limited, self-sufficient, parochial (despite its claims to centrality) perspective, alterity consequently appears as an inferior, not-up-to-the-standard Other that has no traditions, no stature, and perhaps most importantly, no individual “voice”. According to a distinguished critic of modernism, Henry Giroux, this type of discourse has only reinforced the barriers of race and ethnicity and given prominence to the dominant Eurocentric model (ibid.).

The postmodern notion of identity is one that decentres the individual, causing a shift from sheer subjectivity to an almost total loss of subjectivity. [...] The decentred subject is perceived as multifaceted and contradictory, hence identity is no longer viewed as singular and stable, but rather as plural and mutable, and ultimately impossible to grasp through the usual exercise of reason. As a matter of fact, it is the general postmodern indeterminacy and uncertainty that renders every single component of its value system (identity included) unstable. In its turn, postmodernism’s “ontological uncertainty” (Hans Bertens’ term) is the obvious consequence of an acute sense of loss or absence of a centre. In Bertens’ opinion, this deep-rooted uncertainty is one of the two “core” notions of postmodernism (the other being the unstable, decentred “postmodern self”). In the absence of any stable authoritative points of reference (universal truths, essences, centres) the arbitrary and the irrational gain unprecedented prominence. The language of fiction is emptied of its symbolic power and the free linguistic play takes precedence over discursive coherence and unity of form. The so-called self-reflective or metafictional novels of such authors as the Americans William Burroughs, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Thomas Pynchon and William Gass, to name but a few, are based on the view of language as being explicitly and totally self-absorbed. Its self-referentiality is a subversive (rather than an aesthetic) reaction against a civilisation that has

turned out to be a failure and a fraud, and against its legitimating discourse that has likewise proved to be an enormous mystification (Dumitrescu 2001:12).

Despite the new and more critical light it sheds on the subject, postmodernism has been criticized of being “aestheticism” and incapable to analyse difference, marginality and otherness in even more aggressive terms. Cornel West, for instance, argues against the postmodern defence of difference and plurality which, he claims, further marginalises certain ethnic and social groups, though he salutes the postmodern denial of the homogeneous and the universal (West 1989). Linda Hutcheon, the authoritative Canadian theorist of postmodernism also makes a subtle distinction between “difference” and “otherness”. She admits that postmodernism does focus on difference at the expense of uniformity but adds that the very concept of difference involves a typically postmodernist contradiction since, unlike “otherness”, it has no exact opposite term to define itself against. It is always multiple, shifting, provisional (Hutcheon 1988).

4. LIMITS OF IDENTITY POLITICS

Scholars have criticized identity politics on many counts. Liberal political theorists such as Arthur Schlesinger, David Hollinger, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and others have argued that a strong sense of group identification endangers democratic processes and social cohesion, inhibits the ability to form political coalitions, and substitutes the determination of group membership for critical reflection, thus producing what Cornell West calls ‘racial reasoning’. Notwithstanding the Left’s compromises in going along with/collaborating with the popular identity movements, many Leftist scholars such as Eric Hobsbawm, Michael Tomasky, Seal Wilentz, Robert W. McChesney, Bart Landry, Jim Sleeper, Todd Gitlin, Immanuel Wallerstein, Richard Rorty, Nancy Fraser, among others, have criticized what they see as the turn to identity politics. Identity politics fractures the body politic by emphasizing difference at the expense of commonalities; because the focus on identity offers at best a reductivist politics, one that reduces assessment of political position to the process of ascertaining identity and makes ‘a fetish of the virtues of the majority’. [.....] Faced with growing opposition and sustained attacks from the Right, the Left and the centre, identity based struggles no longer enjoy what used to be a wide support to, and positive view of, minority social movements. The accusation that identity politics is prone to essentialism has been the most persistent criticisms. Identity politics, celebrated as politics of difference by *postist* movements (post-structuralism, post-modernism etc.) is basically meant to reclaim a stigmatized identity, to revalue the devalued pole of dichotomized hierarchy.³

5. IDENTITY POLITICS IN INDIA

Identity politics occupies the centre stage in a multicultural state like India where we find vast diversities based on caste, religion, language, region and tribe with a range of political oppressions. These diverse communities continue to claim recognition for their identity. The post-independent Indian state devised its own way of dealing with and accommodating these diverse identities through constitutional provisions, legal interventions and policy frameworks of the welfare state. Contemporary Indian sociopolitical structure has acquired certain new dimensions, which is often at odds while dealing with the resurgence of different identities. The development initiatives adopted under the neo-liberal framework corroding the distinct ethos of community living has infused further energy to the whole process of identity construction and politics.

It is perhaps this claim for and granting of recognition of particular identities by the post-independence state of India that led many scholars to believe that a material basis for the enunciation of identity claims has been provided by the post-independent state and its structures and institutions. Otherwise, the state is seen as an active contributor to identity politics through the creation and maintenance of state structures which define and then recognize people in terms of certain identities. Thus, we find identity politics of various hues abound in India, the most prominent are those based on language, religion, caste, ethnicity or tribal identity. Despite this institutional recognition, there is continuous discrimination, inequality and oppression to these identity groups which pose a grave challenge to the unity and integrity of the Indian state.

The major works on identity politics in India basically focuses on the politics of identity in terms of caste (Kothari 1970; Teltumbde 2012; Hasan 2009; Jodhka 2010a, 2010b; Deshpande 2011; Sharma Mehra 2011), religion (Bose 2009; Saxena 2013; Rudolph and Rudolph 2010), tribes (Suan 2011), language (Abbi 2013; Pradhan 2012; Kaviraj 2010), region (Jana 2011; Rao Bonagani 2011; Mukherjee 2011; Prakash 2001) and ethnicity (Brass 1991; Gupta 1996; Samson 2013; Chandra 2000). However, the above body of literature though in some way or other focus on identity politics, there lacks an extensive analysis on all the identity groups that pose a challenge to the unity and diversity of the idea of pan-Indian state and my paper, in this regard, makes an attempt to highlight this area.

6. Caste

Caste, or *jati*, a defining principle of the Hindu social order, but one that permeates other religious groups as well, is an identity marker unique to India. Tying together notions of purity and pollution, a belief in hierarchy and fixed

occupations, commonality of social manners and customs, dietary habits, dress codes and the general lifestyle, and endogamous marriage norms, are the more than 3000 castes or *jatis* spread throughout the country. To most Hindus, caste is the constant reminder of the non-monolithic quality of their religion. Members of each caste share social status that is pre-defined by the larger community surrounding them. Inequalities and inequities of power, wealth, and status are all reflected in the caste hierarchy of India. Although the nature of interaction and attitudes between and among castes is rapidly changing in recent times due to the impact of modernization, education, and industrialization, the traditional framework of *Varna* still holds good in broadly classifying and hierarchically organizing the thousands of castes into four categories: (1) the Brahmins, traditionally the priests; (2) the Kshatriyas, past rulers and warriors; (3) the Vaishyas, the trading and the mercantile community, and (4) the Shudras, the lowest *varna*, who comprised the service classes, agriculturalists, and artisans. The first three *varnas*, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas, constitute what are called the "forward" or "upper" castes, and the Shudras and the untouchables, those who exist beyond the pale of the caste hierarchy and perform menial tasks including the role of scavengers, are usually denoted as the "lower" castes. Some would prefer calling the Shudras as the intermediate castes and the untouchables as more properly the lower (Acharya 2001:6-7) However, the caste system, which is based on the notion of purity and pollution, hierarchy and difference, has despite social mobility, been oppressive towards the Sudras and the outcastes who suffered the stigma of ritual impurity and lived in abject poverty, illiteracy and denial of political power.

The origin of confrontational identity politics based on caste may be said to have its origin on the issue of providing the oppressed caste groups with state support in the form of protective discrimination. This group identity based on caste that has been reinforced by the emergence of political consciousness around caste identities is institutionalized by the caste-based political parties that profess to uphold and protect the interests of specific identities including the castes. As a result, we can find the upper caste dominated party, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), the lower caste dominate party, the BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party) or the SP (Samajwadi Party) which have tacitly followed the caste pattern to extract mileage in electoral politics. However, the emerging mobilizations along caste-identities have resulted not only in the empowerment of newly originated groups but have increased the intensity of confrontational politics and possibly leading to a growing crisis of governability.

7. Tribes

Tribes in India are usually believed to be living in the periphery of the mainstream Hindu society. Some believe they are the original inhabitants and have resisted attempts to be assimilated into the Hindu fold. Not generally stratified on a ritual and hierarchical basis as caste Hindus and not "integrated" into the surrounding civilization, tribes in India, in many ways, are Hinduism's 'others.' However, in terms of religious affiliation, some report their religion as Hinduism and others call themselves Christians or Muslims. Despite an acceptance in some form of one of the major religions, most tribes also display a continuity of their own beliefs and age-old customs that is typical to its identity and existence in a particular region. The tribes vary between themselves in different aspects, but are concentrated primarily in northeastern, central, and western India. In the northeastern India, six provinces or States are tribal majority populations along with the recent creation of two in eastern and central India, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. In deference to their claims of difference and the principle of selfgovernment, tribal majority provinces have their own laws that protect their cultures and customs, and yet unite them with the rest of India by way of self-governing, self-independent, developmental institutions at the district level. Tribal issues mostly centre on development concerns, but some tribal majority states in northeastern India do also witness secessionist politics and violence (Acharya 2001:8-9).

So, there is a wide variety of articulation of tribal identity in India; ranging from those in northeastern states to those in central India (Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Odisha) to those in Gujarat and Maharashtra, as also to those in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. There is very little similarity between the dynamics of identity articulation between these tribal social groups but their contest for resources with the state take similar forms. Much of this contest is mediated through the politics of development.

8. Language

India is considered to be one of the linguistically most diverse and complex societies in the world. This linguistic diversity was speculated to lead to the break-up of the country in the initial years immediately after independence. Hence, Indian multilingualism is once celebrated as the specific cultural and historical ethos of multiculturalism and social pluralism in India.

India's socio-cultural mosaic is characterized by a linguistic diversity that is extreme with over 1000 languages and dialects. There are at least 24 languages with more than a million speakers each. Hindi, spoken by more than a third of the population and concentrated mostly in north and central India, is the recognized official language of India along with English. Besides Hindi, 17 other languages commonly referred to as regional languages are

recognized by the constitution in its Eighth Schedule and given official status for both political and historical reasons. Most of the officially recognized languages serve the basis for Indian statehood, the federal principle of carving post-independence India into ethno-linguistic provinces, or 'states' as they are called in India. Each state has its own official language, and the educational structure largely follows a three-language policy where besides the official language of the given province, English and Hindi are also taught to schoolgoing children residing in that province (Acharya 2001: 5-6).

Identity claims based on the perception of a collectivity bound together by language may be said to have its origin in the pre-independence politics of the Congress that had promised reorganization of states in the postindependent period on linguistic basis. The claim of separate states for linguistic collectivities did not end in 1956 and even today continues to confront the concerns of the Indian leadership. But the problem has been that none of the created or claimed states are mono-ethnic in composition and some even have numerically and politically powerful minorities. This has resulted in a cascading set of claims that continue to threaten the territorial limits of existing states and disputes over boundaries between linguistic states have continued to stir conflicts, as for instance the simmering tension between Maharashtra and Karnataka over the districts of Belgaum or even the claims of the Nagas to parts of Manipur.

The linguistic divisions have been complicated by the lack of a uniform language policy for the entire country. Since in each state the dominant regional language is often used as the medium of instruction and social communication, the consequent affinity and allegiance that develops towards one's own language gets expressed outside one's state of origin. For instance the formation of linguistic cultural and social groups outside one's state of origin helps to consolidate the unity and sense of community in a separate linguistic society. Thus language becomes an important premise on which group identities are organized and establishes the conditions for defining the 'in-group' and 'out-group'. Kaviraj in his essay engages and argues well about the pluralities of worldview inherent in a multilingual society like India, where achieving cultural homogenization through the primacy of one language is not possible or even desirable (cited in Sarangi 2009:23).

9. Religion

The construction of a community on the shared bond of religion is the important form of identity politics. Communal conflict in India has been crucial in shaping its destiny, culminating in its partition on the eve of its independence. The decades of the 1980s and 1990s have seen a tremendous politicization of communal identities, locating them not only in ethnic/cultural difference but as political constituencies with separate interests. Ashok Acharya points out that religion, an inescapable reality of most Indians in everyday life, is another salient source of social cleavage in modern India. Although most Indians are Hindus (roughly 82 per cent of the population), India is also home to 110 million Muslims (the largest minority at more than 12 per cent of the population), Christians (2.3 per cent), Sikhs (2 per cent), and Buddhists and Jains (who together constitute approximately 1 per cent). With the exception of the province of Jammu and Kashmir where Muslim concentration reaches half the population, most Muslims in post-independence India are scattered throughout the length and breadth of the country. The partition of pre-independence British India on the basis of the twonation theory into India and Pakistan was a major political event in recent history, one that constantly reminds inhabitants of South Asia how the major fault-line in the subcontinent has been drawn by religion (Acharya 2001: 6).

Numerically the Hindus are considered to be the majority, which inspires many Hindu loyalist groups like the RSS (Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh) or the Shiv Sena and political parties like the BJP or the Hindu Mahasabha to claim that India is Hindu state. These claims generate homogenizing myths about India and its history. Again, these claims are countered by other religious groups who foresee the possibility of losing autonomy of practice of their religious and cultural life under such homogenizing claims. This initiates contestations that have often resulted in communal riots.

Historically, the Hindu revivalist movement of the 19th century is considered to be the period that saw the demarcation of two separate cultures on religious basis- the Hindu and the Muslims that depended further because of the partition. This division which has become institutionalized in the form of communal ideology has become a major challenge for India's secular social fabric and democratic polity. Although Hindu-Muslim conflict has been, what Varshney (2002) calls, the "master narrative" of Indian politics, it is observed that since the 1990s the Christian populations have increasingly become the targets of violence. Though communalism for a major part of the last century signified Hindu-Muslim conflict, in recent year's contestations between Hindus and Sikhs, Hindus and Christians have often crystallized into communal conflict. The rise of Hindu national assertiveness, politics of representational government, persistence of communal perceptions, and competition for the socio-economic resources are considered some of the reasons for the generation of communal ideologies and their transformation into major riots.

A contemporary example of a communal identity that drew from local patriotism was the Hindu-Maratha identity popularised by the Shiv Sena (Hansen 2001). Maratha nationalism drew largely from the legend of Shivaji and his propaganda against the Mughals (Bayly in Hansen 2001). Here the “other” is defined in a Muslim. However, the Shiv Sena has been known to have opportunistic political alliances; once the anti-Muslim line stopped paying electoral dividends (since the approach was also being simultaneously used by the BJP), the Shiv Sena began to pursue an economic agenda of preventing loss of Marathi jobs to the migrants in Mumbai. At this point, the wrath was directed towards migrants from the south. Soon enough, a faction from within the party, the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS), declared itself independent under the leadership of Raj Thackeray and adopted a similar hard line against the new – north-Indian other. The point to be emphasised here is that neither the original Maratha-Hindu identity [and] the idea of the Muslim other, nor the politics of regional-identity are constants. Thus, historical local nationalism provides a basis for these xenophobic tendencies, but the victims of these sentiments are a changing lot; and social and political agendas of these parties shift for want of votes, thereby mobilizing very specific (communal/regional) identities at a time (Cited in Saxena 2013:48).

However, like all identity schemes the forging of a religious community glosses over internal differences within a particular religion to generate the “we are all of the same kind” emotion. Thus, differences of caste groups within a homogenous Hindu identity, linguistic and sectional differences within Islam are shelved to create a homogenous unified religious identity.

10. Region

Regional identity is another form of identity politics which plays a major role in present Indian politics. The cultural homogeneity of the regions within the states over the years has been sharpened as a result of the unevenness of development and unequal access to political power in a centralized political economy. Rama Rao Bonagani says that regional identities are rooted amidst India’s diverse rich cultural traditions and are deeply impacted upon by not only shared linguistic, cultural and political consciousness but also by economic variables. Regional identity can be located in terms of the interests of the inhabitants of the region who share an emotional bondage with the region, formed around commonality of religion, language, customs and culture, socioeconomic and political stages of development, common historical and geographical traditions and a common way of living. Any one or more of these widely prevalent sentiments of togetherness tend to strengthen the regional bond in a give situation. Regional identity is constructed for a collective action in order to attain certain definite goals (Rao Bonagani 2011:197).

Ashutosh Kumar argues that India’s federal ideology has registered a marked shift as regional identity; culture and geographical difference now appear to be recognized as a valid basis for administrative division and political representation. No wonder then that the recent decades have been witness to the assertion of well defined geographically, culturally and historically constituted distinct regions that have emerged within the states, showing sharpened ethnic/communal/caste as well as other social-political cleavages like the regional and rural-urban ones (Kumar 2011:11).

Debates over territorial organization have re-entered ‘mainstream’ political discussion after remaining a taboo for a long period, especially during the centralizing and personalizing leadership that took over after Nehru when assertions of regional identity were essentially viewed with suspicion and were stigmatized as parochial, chauvinist and even anti-national. Arguably, such apprehension is not evident in the Constitution which provides a great degree of flexibility given to the Parliament under Article 3 to decide the basis on which new states are to be created i.e., geography, demography, administrative convenience, language, ethnicity...or culture. Such constitutional flexibility has not only allowed for the accommodation of regional aspirations in the past but has also provided an incentive for ongoing political projects aimed at looking for the exit options for the regions within regions (ibid.12-13). After creation of Telangana as the 29th state of India on the ground of regional identity, the list of statehood demands across the country has comparatively increased. Thus, regional identity has become an important form of identity politics in the present politics of India.

11. Ethnicity

Ethnicity is emerging as a focal consideration in the politics of identity in contemporary India. Basically, there are two ways in which the concept of ethnic identity is used: one, it considers the formation of identity on the basis of single attribute like language, religion, caste, region etc; two, it considers the formation of identity on the basis of multiple attributes cumulatively. However, it is the second way formation of identity on the basis of more than one characteristics-culture, custom, region, religion or caste, which is considered as the most common way of formation of ethnic identity. The one ethnic identity is formed in relation to the other ethnic identity. The relation among various ethnic identities can be both harmonious and conflictual. Whenever there is competition among

the ethnic identities on the real or imaginary basis, it expressed in the form of autonomy movements, demand for secession or ethnic riots.

In many ways, the construction of regional identities is similar to the manner in which ethnic identities are created. Glorifying the past; exaggerating concerns about real or imagined deprivations, alienation, and identity; disparaging the other and constructing boundaries to separate “us” from “them” are common to both processes (Srikanth 2013:44). Paul Brass sees ethnicity and nationalism as “social and political constructions. They are creations of elites, who draw upon, distort and sometimes fabricate materials from the cultures of the groups they wish to represent in order to protect their well-being or existence or to gain political and economic advantage for their groups as well as for themselves (Brass 1991:9). Dipankar Gupta identifies the Khalistani movement as an ethnic movement as distinct from a communal movement, but implies that it may have moved from the later to the former (Gupta 1996:9).

The Northeast is a good example of how new forms of ethnic identity politics has arisen since the 1980s. Consciousness of being part of a ethnic group and asserting their identity [has] arisen steadily. Devoid of any broader platform except their narrow ethnic identity such politics have turned into conflict with [‘other’]. Whether they are the Dimasas or the Naga or the Bodo or the Karbi, many of them are pitted against each other in fratricidal conflicts (Karat 2011:46). Besides northeast, we can see in many other parts of India like Gorkhaland, Coorg, Vindhyanchal, Vidarbha, Haritadesh, Awadh Pradesh, Purvanchal, Bundelkhand, Koshal, and Saurashtra that pose a challenge to form separate state on the ground of ethnic and regional identity. Thus, the politics of ethnicity and regionalism stand as a great hindrance to the unity and integrity of India.

In such a context, Brass tells us that “In India, where there is no dominant nation and no single large ethnic group dispersed throughout the country in privileged positions, the potential for a complete unraveling of the country’s unity seems less great. If it is difficult for militant nationalist parties in north India to unite the Hindispeaking region politically and still less the Hindu majority in the country as a whole, it is even more difficult to unite the non-Hindi-speaking areas politically against the centre. Contemporary crisis areas in India, however militant, violent, and separatist, are confined to relatively small units: Punjab, Kashmir, and the northeastern tribal areas” (Brass 1991:329).

12. CONCLUSION

However, the above politically salient identities those has been, and still are, locked in some form of political struggle with others and the state to sustain and deepen a politics of difference while seeking to widen, in certain cases, the democratic space of collective autonomy. Buttressed by democratic institutions identity conflicts surrounding caste, language, religion, region, ethnicity and tribe challenge conventional notions of pan-Indian nationalism and unity. In the Indian context, while “differences” need to be allowed, even encouraged, since this is the basic reality of India, the “other” needs to be consciously included into the “self image” and a new inclusive self image created that tolerates the other. As Richardson has commented, globalisation need not result in “sameness”, but in a willingness to accept the “differences” of the other (Richardson, 2001:172). Progressive identity can only be achieved through cultural receptiveness and reciprocity by both the “us” and the “they” components. The “other” must also seek to be accepted, so that sharp differences can be tapered off. Ways and means need to be found to express one’s own identity, without in any way impinging on or diminishing that of the “other” (D’Souza 2010:24). It is in this context, we can conclude that identity politics as seen as movements and struggles for recognition of the claims arising from various cultural groups pose a grave challenge to the very fabric of democratic process and social cohesion of the society. This, first of all, calls for a change in the mindset of the people to respect and recognize the difference and also a change at the institutional level to publicly affirm and recognize the difference.

13. NOTES

1. Performativity points to the process of assuming an identity and allows us to view it as socially constructed rather than fixed and to keep thinking of it as flexible. Performativity refers “not to a singular or deliberate ‘act’, but is rather the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names”(Butler Judith (1993:3). See for example, Judith Butler (1993), *Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, London and New York: Routledge.
2. The Combahee River Collective was a Black Feminist Lesbian organization active in Boston from 1974 to 1980. They are perhaps best known for developing the Combahee River Collective Statement (CRCS), a key document in the history of contemporary Black feminism and the development of the concept of identity as used among political organizers and social theorists. See for example, “Combahee River Collective” in Beverly Guy-Sheftal (ed.), *Words of Fire: An Anthology of AfricanAmerican Feminist Thought*, New York: The New Press, 1995, p.231.

3. Cited in Teltumbde, Anand (2012), "Identity Politics and the annihilation of castes", *Seminar*, 633, May.

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