

## Ethnicity, Language and Nationalism: Some Conceptual Issues

S.C. DANIEL

This paper will make an attempt to state and explicate the intrinsic relation between ethnicity, language and nationalism. It will also identify the problems arising thereof with particular reference to our great country. In order to achieve these purposes, it is imperative on my part to take up these three concepts one by one so as to highlight certain conceptual issues that are rather inevitable. Let me take up the concept of ethnicity first.

*Oxford English Dictionary* defines the terms 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic' as follows. "Ethnicity—heathendom, heathen superstition, ethnic—nation especially non-Israelitish, Gentile nation." It is quite obvious that these Oxford lexican meanings ascribe to these terms a heavy negative value-loading. Therefore, the original connotation of these terms cannot provide a valid basis for the explanatory, value-neutral terminology since they involve evaluative orientation. In the past, 'ethnics' were considered to be 'others' on the basis of the categories such as minorities, underdeveloped, and so on. However, these categories have no longer any meaningful application because of the fact that today everybody is considered to be an ethnic since he or she is a member of some ethnic group or other. Thus, ethnicity has now become constitutive of humanity. Ethnicity no longer signifies marginal group or minority; it signifies pluralism. Ethnic pluralism indicates that there is a variety, in fact, an immense variety of ethnicities. Given this view, it would be a gross mistake to hold that there is one and only one ethnicity.

What would count as ethnic? It is very important to answer this rather vexing question. At the outset itself it must be pointed out

that there cannot be *the* definition of ethnicity *per se* or as such. Needless to say that an ostensive definition of ethnicity is impossible since we cannot point out and declare, 'this is an ethnic group whereas that is not an ethnic group'. It is generally accepted that ethnicity is a collectivity, which means it has a collective character, or it is a collective whole. Hence, when we talk about such a collectivity, we cannot see objects as such, but only object—indicators, or object—recognitors that are symptomatic or indicative of ethnicity. An ethnic collectivity consists of persons who have one or more common characteristics, and occupy a common ethnic base or platform. Persons who belong to a particular ethnic collectivity are conscious of their ethnic identities, which consist in their recognition, and valuation of their membership in that particular collectivity.]

It must be pointed out that there is a fundamental difference between ethnic categories and ethnic groups. And this fundamental difference consists in the fact that ethnic categories are more or less permanent while the ethnic groups are changeable or variable. This is why Robert H. Jackson avers: "An 'ethnic group', therefore, is a collection of persons who occupy an ethnic platform, recognise and value their common occupancy—share an identity—and are organised and therefore have a common interest in maintaining their association."<sup>2</sup>

Ethnicity as a collectivity must be differentiated and distinguished from other collectivities such as castes, classes, and so on. A caste, as it stands today, is an ascriptive collectivity possessing a generally recognised standing in a large society. However, it does not mean that caste is mere ethnos without ethno centricism. As a matter of fact, caste has become ethnos with a pronounced ethno centricism, that is to say, caste involves the belief in the inherent superiority of one's own caste and culture especially of higher castes accompanied by a feeling of contempt for other castes and cultures. On the other hand, social class as a collectivity is a collection of persons, who occupy a base or platform of material inequality. Though caste system and class system are similar to each other in being vertical or pyramidal arrangements of social collectivities, they have the following important dissimilarity. Caste system is based on cultural ranking or gradation while class system is based

on material inequality. It must be pointed out that ethnic collectivity is different from caste and social class collectivities because of the fact that former consists of horizontally or parallelly aligned collectivities of which none possesses a generally acknowledged claim to superiority over any other ethnic collectivity. Ethnic groups do not stand for what is advantageous for the individual members of those groups. They, instead, stand for those collective or general conditions that are advantageous and essential to the quality of life of the ethnic community as a whole and the common identity of members.

[A proper analysis of the concept of ethnicity must consist in reduction of ambiguity and enhancement of clarity of meanings.] Furthermore, we must settle for a minimal definition, which would include only the core or necessary factors to the neglect of peripheral or contingent factors. I believe that it is one of those things which is easier said than done. However, I would like to make an endeavour. [The core or the necessary factors of the concept of ethnicity consist in the following: (i) ascription of certain characteristics, (ii) plurality, (iii) identity, and (iv) organisation. And the peripheral or contingent factors of the concept of ethnicity are: public authority, political independence, blood relation, hierarchy, inequality, and so on.]

[A word or two about the concept of culture may not be out of place here since it figures prominently in the ethnicity literature. Some employ 'culture' as a generic term to include within itself more specific terms such as 'religion', 'language' and so on. Some employ it as a specific term along with 'religion', 'language', and so on. Still others use it in both ways, that is, both as a generic term as well as a specific term.] If the term 'culture' is used both ways, a logical mistake known as category-mistake, will be committed. And this logical error consists in assigning elements to one category, when they actually belong to another category. For example, either she bought a left hand glove and a right hand glove or she bought a pair of gloves (but not both).<sup>3</sup> In my opinion, it would be prudent to avoid using the term 'culture' as a generic term as well since it might lead some people to conflating and identifying it mistakenly with certain specific terms such as religion and language. In fact, some people actually do it in order to achieve their own ends. For example, some people identify culture with religion. And this enables them to muddle the issue of what has come to be known as 'cultural

identity'. They tend to identify culture with religion, and claim that once a person changes his religion, he loses his culture. This leads, according to them, to what they call 'cultural identity crisis'. This view is gaining currency. I believe that time has come to discredit this view once and for all to avoid certain confusion. The above discussion will throw some light upon the relation that holds between ethnicity and culture. Though ethnicity and culture are closely related to one another, they should not be identified with one another since they are two separate, distinct specific terms.

There are many ethnic indicators, which include characteristics such as race, colour, language, religion, customs, geographical origins, and so on. It may be reiterated that these indicators are only symptomatic, and not necessary or constitutive elements of ethnic collectivity. Ethnicity and language are closely related phenomena. Both ethnicity and language are pluralistic in nature. Needless to point out that there is an immense variety of languages in India including north-east India. However, though there is a tremendous diversity of languages, all the languages must have a common core, which consists in having a common conceptual apparatus of thinking. The Miris argue that there is a truly fundamental unity among all the languages, and that it consists in sharing a basic (central) conceptual framework. Here, basic or central means principal, chief or dominant. It also means that from the basic (central) conceptual framework other related things proceed. Thus, this basic (central) conceptual framework is logically primitive or non-derivative, that is to say, other conceptual framework can be derived from it. Miris are worth quoting: "... a unity consisting in the fact that they all share a *basic* (central) conceptual framework. There may be variation in details, in certain kinds of sophistication and discrimination, but the fundamental structure must be the same. Also, although "the categories" (*a priori* concepts) might change through history, their central application must remain more or less unaltered, permanent (eternal). Thus, take the concept of time. This may vary widely from language to language—and, therefore, some might say—from culture to culture—but whatever the variation, the centre of the concept must be the same. This centre would consist of distinctions such as before, after, at the same time as, early, late etc. There could be no language, in which one could talk about one's experiences,

and which, yet, did not have room for distinctions such as the above."<sup>4</sup> I agree with them it follows from this that human experiences can be shared by speakers of various languages because of this truly fundamental unity among all languages.

There is an intimate relation between language and nationalism especially between vernacular and nationalism. Vernacular provides the masses with an emotionalized link between language and nationalism. Consequent upon this, an important question arises, that is, should we have a linguistic reethinization in India? Some, fortunately, not all, are convinced that there must be a linguistic reethinization in our country so as to bring about an emotionalized national integration. It follows from this that they feel convinced that there must be not only the *one* common language, but also that this common language must be the national or official language for all the speakers of different languages. This has created suspicion in the minds of the people of Tamil Nadu to a great extent, and to some extent, of the people of Bengal, Maharashtra and north-east.

The protagonists of language pluralism argue that language is not a natural indicator of nationality. They also argue that speakers of different languages of India must be considered equally nationalistic as the speakers of so called common and national or official language, if not more. They point out that regional languages have been successfully serving as vehicles not only for popular religious revivals but also for various nationalist movements and awareness. Therefore, any movement on behalf of a supra nationality or state or national language may face unusual difficulty. For instance, The regional languages (of India) developed as the literacy vehicles of a popular religious revival extending over centuries . . . . The *bhakti* movement which popularized Hinduism and made it intelligible to a mass public was a movement conducted in the language of each region . . . . a millenium ago . . . . The *bhakti* poets went out of their way to adhere to the native or *desi* meters characteristic of language as it was spoken and there by capture its flavour and make more effective emotional contact with would be devotees . . . . It was for this reason that regional languages provided the obvious outlet for the burst of new cultural creativity which followed the 19th century influx of western social and political thought. . . . (and which explains) the resistance to Hindi on the part of the votaries of other

languages, notably Tamil, Bengali and Marathi, which have a far more impressive and more ancient literacy heritage.”<sup>5</sup>

Since there is pluralism of vernaculars or native speeches or languages in India, there is no *the* vernacular as such in India. Nevertheless, many lovers of this country advocate that Hindi must be the common as well as the national language. This has created suspicion in the minds of linguistic minorities. It has also caused many a turmoil. The votaries of the above mentioned view also vouch for the development of other vernaculars as well. And this view has created more problem than it has solved.

The language policy of our country, I may venture to affirm, mainly originates from Gandhi's views. Let us therefore look at his view for a while. Gandhi is of the opinion that our nation, for that matter any nation, must have many things in common. One of these many things in common, according to him, is language. He advocates that medium should be Hindustani.<sup>6</sup> He says: “It is generally agreed that medium should be Hindustani—resultant of Hindi and Urdu, neither highly Sanskritized, nor highly Persianized or Arabianized.”<sup>7</sup> He is also for a common script. He recommends Devanagari script as the common script. He decides in favour of Devanagari script for the following reason.” The deciding factor being that it (Devanagari) is the script known to the largest part of India.”<sup>8</sup> It is very strange but true that he is for the abolition of all undeveloped and unwritten scripts. He says: “All the undeveloped and unwritten dialects should, in my humble opinion, be sacrificed and merged in the great Hindustani script.”<sup>9</sup> This creates a problematic situation for the people of north-east India. Needless to say that this part of our country is replete with the so called ‘undeveloped’ and ‘unwritten’ dialects. Gandhi does not seem to consider ‘undeveloped’ and ‘unwritten’ dialects as languages. Gandhi commits the mistake of rejecting these dialects by not considering them as languages just because they happen to be ‘undeveloped’ and ‘unwritten’. Miris are worth quoting here. They say: “A language is sometimes criticized on grounds such as the following: (i) it is a distorted version of another language (e.g., “Assamese is a distortion of Bengali”); (ii) it does not have a script (“no tribal language in the north-east has its own script); (iii) it does not have a literature (“the Miri language does not have a literature, and therefore, it is only a dialect); (iv) it is incomplete

and inadequate ("The Bengali language says much better than what the Apatani language can say only inadequately.")<sup>10</sup> (ii) and (iv) are relevant here. The Miris have the following to say about (ii). "... to criticise another language, on the ground that it does not have a script, it is peculiarly misplaced. The script of a language is not an integral part of it. It shows, as it were, outside the language. A script without a language is 'dead' but a language without a script is still very much a language. ... The absence of a script is not a criterion of the poverty of a language."<sup>11</sup> (iv) implies that a language being incomplete and inadequate remains undeveloped. It may be pointed out here that no language can be said to be completely developed. All the languages remain undeveloped in various degrees. Moreover, it would be disastrous to develop a language by borrowing various elements from any other languages. Because any language with the addition of elements from any other language(s) will not remain the same. In other words, whatever may be said in a thus 'developed' language will not be what is said in the original language. The point which I have been trying to make is this: all 'undeveloped' and 'unwritten' dialects must be considered as language(s). Given this view, Gandhi is guilty of sacrificing the languages of the people of north-east India, which are their souls, for the mere mechanical merger of these dialects or vernaculars in the so called great Hindustani stream.

There seems to be a confusion between the concepts of common language and national or official language. This confusion is due to the failure of not recognising the fundamental difference between these two concepts. It must be noted here that Gandhi pleads for a common language. He says: "we must promote a common language." He also pleads for a national language, and he lays down the following requirements of a national language. "(1) It should be easy to learn for Government officials. (2) It should be capable of serving as a medium of religious, economic and political intercourse throughout India. (3) It should be the speech of the majority of the inhabitants of India. (4) It should be easy to learn for the whole of the country. (5) In choosing this language considerations of temporary or passing interest should not count."<sup>12</sup> The requirement 3 makes it very clear that Gandhi conflates the two concepts of common language and national language. Moreover, he recommends

Hindi to be the common language as well as the national language.

Let us examine Gandhi's above mentioned recommendation. There is a sea of difference between Hindi being the common language and it being the national language. Hindi might have established itself as a common language. But it is highly debatable whether it has established itself as a national language. Hindi as a national or official language is bound to create insurmountable problems for the non-Hindi speaking people of India. If it becomes the only national or official language of India, it will put the speakers of other languages especially of Tamil, Bengali, Assamese and tribal languages at a great disadvantage. Needless to say that the speakers of Hindi will have a great advantage over the non-speaker of Hindi. It will be almost impossible for the speakers of other languages to compete with the people whose vernacular happens to be Hindi. Devanagari script might have similarity with a few languages of India. But, what about Tamil? Its script is entirely dissimilar to that of Devanagari script. However, speakers of other languages may not have any great difficulty in accepting Hindi as the common language. But, they will have nothing but difficulties in accepting Hindi as the only national or official language. It may be a good idea to promote a language which is least common to all Indians as the national or official language so that almost everybody will have an equal start. What about one of the tribal languages of north-east India?

Nation is a concept based on region rather than race. Membership of a 'Race' is natural, that is, by birth, while membership of a nation, that is, nationality, may be acquired. While race implies somatic ties, a nation, which may be composed of multiple races, is sustained by emotional ties, such as love and self-sacrifice for the country, allegiance to its constitution, and so on. Love for the country, in the ultimate analysis, is love for the people of the country. Nations are communities which desire to possess political sovereignty. This characteristic of nation distinguishes it from various ethnic groups; for, ethnic groups are not interested in possessing political independence or sovereignty. Nation primarily refers to any independent political unit which is largely or increasingly under the control of a particular nationality.

The term 'nationality' first came to be widely applied during

the first quarter of the century in connection with the political problem of reconciling the sovereignty of states with the autonomy of ethnic groups. Nationality presupposes a level of emotional integration. J.S. Mill defines nationality as follows: "(A portion of mankind may be said to constitute a nationality if they are (united among themselves by common sympathies which do not exist between them and any other) —which make them (cooperate with each other more willingly than with other people, desire to be under the same government, and desire that it should be government by themselves or a portion of themselves exclusively). This (feeling of nationality) may have been generated by various causes. Sometimes it is the effect of identity of race and descent. Community of language, and community of religion, greatly contribute to it. Geographical limits are one of its clauses. But the strongest of all is identity of political antecedents; the possession of a national history, and consequent community of recollection; collective pride and humiliation, pleasure and regret, connected with the same incident in the past."<sup>13</sup>

Nationalism is a powerful force in modern world. Nationalism presupposes political independence, and it tries to achieve its basic aims and self-direction. Nation, nationality and nationalism are cognate concepts which are intrinsically related to one another. Our nation is multi ethnic, multi linguistic and multi religious. Pluralism of different sorts is a reality, and it is constitutive of our nationalism. This goes to show that there is no *the* ethnicity, nor *the* language nor *the* religion of our nation, for, there are many ethnic groups, a wonderful variety of languages, and a beautiful array of religions. Therefore, it would be wrong to identify our nation and nationalism with any particular ethnic group, however, dominant it may be, or with any particular language, however, common it may be or with any particular religion, however, powerful it may be. The various ethnic groups of our nation try to achieve certain basic aims and self-direction. It must treat all the languages equally, and it must have respect, not equal respect, which is not possible, for all the religions of our country. Our nationalism must be defined as follows. It is characterized by 'collective pride and humiliation, pleasure and regret', common sympathies, political independence or sovereignty, region rather than race and emotional integration. This emotional

integration can be brought through the various vernacular of our country. This goes to show that the concept of one nation, one race, one language and one religion becomes suspect. We must have one nation with multiplicity of race, language and religion. One should not try to have one nation with one language, one race and one religion. If we do so, it will lead to disastrous consequences.

#### NOTES & REFERENCES

1. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, Volume I, Oxford Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 1971.
2. Robert H. Jackson, 'Ethnicity' in *Social Science Concepts—A Systematic Analysis*, ed. by Giovanni Sartori, Sage Publ., New Delhi, 1984, p. 208.
3. Ryle, Gilbert, *Concept of Mind*.
4. Mrinal and Sujata Miri, 'Unity in Diversity' in *North East Region—Problems and Prospects of Development*, edited by B.L. Abbi, Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development (CRRID), 1984, p. 156.
5. Harrison, Selig S., *India: The Most Dangerous Decades*, Princeton, N.J. Princeton University Press, 1960, pp. 287-283.
6. I do not see any appreciable difference between Hindustani and Hindi. In my opinion, therefore, they are one and the same language. Nehru says: "In my view Hindustani is the only language that can be treated as a national language for the whole of India. The question of script can be solved later." (quoted by R.P. Sharma in 'Nehru and the National Language', *The North-Eastern Hill University Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol. VIII, No. 4, 1990, p. 68. Here is a glaring case of conflating and identifying the two concepts of common language and national or official language. R.P. Sharma holds the view that if we try to develop Hindustani so as to make it adequate to the needs of the user, we inevitably branch off into Hindi or Urdu (See his article cited above). This view goes to support my central thesis as regards the two concepts of common language and national or official language.
7. Gandhi, M.K. *India of My Dreams*, Compiled by P.K. Prabhu, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, p. 203.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 204.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Mrinal and Sujata Miri, 'Unity in Diversity' in *North East Region: Problems and Prospects of Development*, Edited by B.L. Abbi, Centre for Research and Industrial Development (CRRID), 1984, p. 159.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 159-160.
12. Gandhi, M.K. *Op. cit.*, p. 205.
13. J.S. Mill, quoted by Robert Jackson, *Op. cit.*, p. 232.