
UNIT 9 ETHNIC MOVEMENTS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO TRIBALS

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9.1 INTRODUCTION

Even before India could assume its present shape a sovereign, democratic and secular republic following the attainment of Independence from the British rule, different ethnic groups have been clamouring for their recognition in the society in terms of cultural, economy and politics. Such claims became more strident after the country became independent. As the time passes more and more claims are made by several groups, many of whom were not visible on the political scene earlier. Many scholars categorise such movements as ethnic movements. This unit attempts to discuss ethnic movements in India with special reference to the tribals.

9.2 WHAT ARE ETHNIC MOVEMENTS?

For a proper understanding of ethnic movements it necessary to understand what we mean by ethnicity as such movements are associated with it. Ethnicity is denotes towards identification of a group of people on the basis of certain criteria or markers which they are supposed to share with each other. These markers include culture, race, language, religion, customs, history, economic experiences, etc. For a group of people to share such attributes another requirement is that they get mobilised into some collective action for attainment of certain demands. The number of markers or attributes which form the basis of an ethnic group depends on the choice of these factors by the ethnic group or its leadership. But there are differences among the scholars regarding the number of attributes which constitute and ethnic group. Scholars in India generally consider that mobilisation as ethnic which is based on the multiple attributes — language, religion, culture, history, economy, etc. For example, the language based mobilisation is considered as linguistic mobilisation and the groups as such is considered as linguistic group. Similarly caste based mobilisation is considered as dalit, backward or any other caste mobilisation. In India the religion-based mobilisation is called communal mobilisation. But the scholars who follow American and European traditions catergorise even the mobilisation based on the single attribute — language, religion, caste, etc, as ethnic mobilisation. They also do not distinguish between the communal and ethnic mobilisation.

For example, Paul R. Brass uses ethnic and communal mobilisation interchangeably. On the other hand, Dipankar Gupta in his book *The Context of Ethnicity: The Sikh Identity in a Comparative Perspective* differentiates between communalism and ethnicity. He argues that the ethnic mobilisation is related to the nation-state — the territory and the sovereignty. And the communal mobilisation does not involve the nation-state. It is confined to the government and two or more communities in the conflict, one of which alleges that the government discriminates against it in preference to the other. The point in dispute could be job, specific rights of the communities, etc. According to him in the ethnic mobilisation the loyalty of one ethnic group to the referent of nation-state is questioned. It is not so in the case of communal mobilisation. Also, the group identities are not permanent. In the changing context of time and space an ethnic identity can become communal and vice versa. However, the general tendency among the scholars is to consider the multi-attributes mobilisation of the communities as ethnic.

Ethnicity is also a relative term. An ethnic group differentiates itself from another groups which also shares certain attributes which are different from it. It feels that it has to preserve its identity and interests from the perceived or real threats of other ethnic groups and institutions, and processes associated with them. Ethnic movements are concerned with the preservation and protection of the cultural identities of the ethnic groups and their other interests. Another concept which is related to the ethnicity is nationality or nation. While some scholars differentiate between ethnicity, nationalities or even nations they are used interchangeably. If one section of scholars considers a multiple-marker based mobilisation as ethnic, there are others which call these as the mobilisation of the nations or the nationalities. Therefore, in the light of the literature available the terms ethnicity and nationalities/nations are used interchangeably in this unit.

9.3 APPROACHES TO STUDY ETHNIC MOVEMENTS

You have already in unit 2 about the approaches to study social movements which include ethnic movements also. There are, however, some approaches which are used specifically to study the ethnic movements. The most commonly used approaches to study the ethnic movements are: the primordial, the instrumentalist and the approach which combines the features of primordial and instrumentalist approaches. The primordial approach holds that the basis of the formation of the ethnic groups are “given”. There are traits of an ethnic group which are inherited by them, i.e., culture, language, customs, religions, etc. Similarly other ethnic group also has certain inherited characteristics. Since the differences in the markers of various ethnic groups vary from each other, they involve in the ethnic movements because of these “given” traits. There are bound to be conflict between different ethnic groups. The advocates of the instrumentalist approach on the other hand believe that ethnic groups are creation of the leadership or the elites belonging to these groups. The differences in the language, culture, customs, economic conditions of the people or the social cleavages are manipulated by the elite of the ethnic groups to generate ethnic consciousness and start ethnic movements. There both real and imagined reasons for the formation of ethnic movements and generation of the ethnic movements. The ethnic community when created on the basis of imagined attributes are thus “imagined” or “constructed” communities. The advocates of the third approach believe that both of these approaches are marked into “bi-polarity” — the basis of ethnicity is either “given” or “imagined” or “constructed”. But there are problems with both of these approaches. While the “primordial” approach does not explain why and

how an ethnic group gets mobilised into the collective action, the “instrumentalist” approach does not explain as to why an ethnic group responds to the call of the elite, leaders or politicians. They advocate a combination of both the primordial and instrumentalist approaches instead of “bi-polar” approach.

9.4 ETHNIC MOVEMENTS DURING POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD: A GENERAL VIEW

Almost all the major regions of the country have witnessed ethnic movements. They take the forms of movements for regional autonomy, for creation of separate states, demand for secession or insurgency. These manifestations of ethnic movements are also called self-determination movements. In several cases ethnic movements give rise to conflicts or riots on the lines of ethnic divide based on all or some the markers – tribe, caste, language, religion, etc. The self-determination movements actually question the nation-state building model which was introduced by the Independent India. Known as Nehruvian or the Mahalanobis model this model presumed that in the course of development or modernisation the identities formed on the basis of ascriptive factors – language, caste, tribe, religion will disappear and the development will take place on the secular lines. But much before the effect of this model could be felt, it was questioned on the all major consideration – language, region and nationality. Although the movements started with the demand based on single marker like language or culture, they drew support of people who shared more than one attribute in a particular region. Starting with the rejection of the Indian Constitution by the Nagas in the North-East, (see sub-section 9.5.4) it spread in the form of Dravidian ethnic movement and demand for the formation of linguistic states with classic example of the movement of for creation of separate state of Andhra Pradesh in South, movements in Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab and Shiv Sena's against South Indians in Mumbai.

In Tamil Nadu following the legacy of E V Ramaswami Naicker three issues formed the basis of ethnic movement in the first two decades following independence – language, dravidian culture, and religion. The leadership of the movement argued that imposition of the North Indian Hindi language, Brahminical Hindu religion and Aryan culture were detrimental to the development of the dravidian identity. Therefore, the Tamil ethnic movement had demanded, stopping of the imposition of Hindi language secession from India. However, towards the end of the 1960s the demand for secession was given up by the Tamil nationality/ethnic group. It then shift its demand to get autonomy to the states. Though the Dravidian assertion in India has become milder since the late 1960s, sentiments against the imposition of Hindi language still are important factors of mobilisation there. In the light of the movements and violence generated by them prompted Salig S. Harrison to describe the decades of the 1950s-1960s as the “most dangerous decades”.

The state was initially reluctant to reconsider the demand for the linguistic reorganisation of the state. But it had to consider this demand following the death of a Gandhian P. Srinivasulu who died of hunger strike demanding a linguistic state of Andhra Pradesh. Government's acceptance of demand to create Andhra Pradesh led to the reorganisation of the states on the linguistic basis in 1953. But reorganisation of the state did not halt the demand for the separate states.

The ethnic movement in Punjab was based on three types of issues – regional, religious and economic. Spearheaded by the Akali Dal, the leadership in Punjab argued that since Sikhs follow a separate religion and speak different language, they should get a separate state. On some occasions, it got reflected in the communal divide between the Hindus and Sikhs in the state, resulting in the ethnic conflict. They launched a Punjabi Suba movement during the 1950s and 1960s demanding a separate state of Punjab for them. Baldev Raj Nayar observes that Akali Dal's strategy during the Punjabi Suba movement included constitutional means like memoranda, rallies and marches; penetration into the Congress organisation in order to influence the party in favour of a separate state; and, agitational means which included marches to shrines, intimidation and force. As a result of the Punjabi Suba movement, Punjab was created as separate state on November 1, 1966. According to Paul R Brass, the attitude of the central government towards the ethnic conflicts or mobilisation in the 1950s and 1960s was marked by an unwritten code — aversion to the demands for creation of the states on the religious grounds; no concession to the demands of the linguistic, regional or other culturally defined groups; no concession to groups involved in ethnic dispute unless there was support to the demand from both groups involved in the conflict. In his opinion, demand for creation of a separate state of Punjab was accepted only when there was also a demand for creation of the separate state of Harayana for Hindi speaking population of the same state.

The ethnic movement in Punjab again arose in the 1980s. It challenged the sovereignty of the Indian state the notion of India as a nation-state. It sought to establish a sovereign state of Khalistan, to be based on the tenets of Sikhism. The Khalistan movement and the issues related to were generally referred to as “Punjab Crisis”. The movement became violent and came to be identified with terrorism in the popular, academic and political discourse. The advocates of the Khalistan movement argued that Sikhs, as followers of the minority religion have been discriminated in India despite their contribution to Indian economy and army. The rise of Khalistan movement, terrorism or the in the 1980s has been a sequence to the political developments in the country which preceded it. The 1970s were marked by the challenge of the Akali Dal to the dominance of the Congress in Punjab. In order to meet this challenge the Congress took the help of Sikh religious leader Sant Jarnail Singh Bhinderanwale in the 1980 Legislative assembly elections in Punjab. The use of services of Bhinderanwale had its cultural and political implication for the country and the state. It encouraged Bhinderanwale to assert his authority independently and assume the leadership of the Khalistan movement. Not only a large number of Sikh youths were attracted to the movement, the movement also received support of the foreign forces. The state responded with the Operation Blue Star: sending of the armed forces to nab terrorists who were hiding in the Golden Temple at Amritsar including Sant Bhinderanwale. This ultimately led to the assassination of Indira Gandhi. The Khalistan movement also resulted in the ethnic divide between the Hindus and Sikhs in Punjab.

The scholars have explained the ethnic movement of the 1970s and 1980s in Punjab in terms of socio-economic and political factors. Those who explain it in terms of the socio-economic factors follow the Marxian perspective. They argue that the “Punjab Crisis” occurred in the wake of green revolution; inability of the Sikh farmers to meet the rising cost of investment in agriculture, rising unemployment among the youth and growth of the consumerist culture which gave rise to the feeling of losing Sikh identity,

etc., contributed to the rise of militancy in Punjab. The scholars who give the political explanation find the socio-economic explanation inadequate. They argue that the Punjab crisis was the result of a manipulation of the religion and problems of the people by the politicians.

The basis of ethnic movement in Jammu and Kashmir are language, religion and geographical location. A section of people of the state have argued since the ethnic composition of state in terms of language, religion and geography is different from the dominant ethnic groups in the country, region should be treated differently. Some of them have not considered themselves as members of the Union of India. As a result, they have demanded cessation from India; some have advocated merger with Pakistan, some have demanded a separate state for the region and some have advocated merger of two Kashmirs — one occupied by Pakistan and other of India, to become a single state. Supporters of this perspective have launched insurgency involving violence and loss human beings and material. They are supported by the foreign forces, especially Pakistan. The popular leadership in the state has also been divided on the issue of relationship of the state with the nation-state. Hari Singh, the ruler of the Jammu and Kashmir initially opposed the accession of the state into the union of India. But he had to agree to it in the face of attack of the Pakistani forces. Sheikh Abdullah had supported the merger of the state with Union of India. But in the course of time he wavered on the issue. He formed Plebiscite Front, which led to his incarceration by the central government from 1953 till 1964. According to Balraj Puri the reasons for the insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir include: attitude of the central government, the lack of opposition in the state, derailment of democracy by the central and state leadership, rising unemployment and other problems of people, cold war and Pakistan. Even within Jammu and Kashmir there are ethnic movements by the smaller groups in Laddakh and Jammu and Kashmir, demanding autonomy within the state of Jammu and Kashmir. These regions allege that they are discriminated against by the dominant religious communities and prosperous regions — Muslims of Kashmir.

9.5 ETHNIC MOVEMENTS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO TRIBALS

In the earlier section you have studied about the ethnic movement in general, specifically regarding the non-tribals. In this section you will study about the ethnic movements of the tribals of India. In fact, the tribals provide the most appropriate examples of the ethnic movements in the country. In their case, almost all factors, both real and imagined, which the tribal communities share among themselves – culture, customs, language, race, religion (indigenous or otherwise), economic issues, contribute to their mobilisation. Even if the their mobilisation starts with a single marker, it is the multiple markers which come to play their roles in the due course. Tribal ethnic movements find their expression in all forms, as discussed in the section 9.4 of this unit — insurgency, protection of the culture and economy of the “sons of the soil” from the outside exploiters, secession from the Union of India, autonomy movements/ demand for the separate state; and, ethnic conflicts and riots.

The most common issues which account for the tribals’ ethnic mobilisation are: perceived or real threat to their indigenous culture and economy including the natural resources like mineral, forest and modern market opportunities by the outsiders (non-tribals middle

classes, businessmen, moneylenders, bureaucrats); their discrimination by the state, especially at the central levels and its representatives (central government employees, army, police, etc.).

9.5.1 Who are Tribals?

Unlike the Scheduled Castes, there are differences among the scholars on the criteria to identify the tribals or the Scheduled Tribes. While the Scheduled Castes consist of the erstwhile untouchable castes placed in the lowest rung of the Hindu society, the tribals follow multiple religions in the country – Buddhism, Christianity, Islam or their indigenous religions. However, there is almost a unanimity among the scholars on certain characteristics of the tribals. The principal of these characteristics are as follows:

- 1) Their close association with nature, mainly the forests;
- 2) Relatively traditional means of cultivation and less developed market;
- 3) Near absence of the rigid division within the community and discrimination on the basis of birth, unlike the caste division among the Hindus;
- 4) Presence of the traditional chiefs or headmen and better position of women as compared to the non-tribals;
- 5) Attachment/reverence to traditional customs and culture.

Article 342 of the Constitution attributes “isolation, backwardness and cultural distinctiveness” as the characteristics of the Scheduled Tribes.

These characteristics, however, have undergone changes as a result of modernisation – education, impact of Christianity on many tribes, changing cropping pattern or penetration of market, economic differentiation and emergence of middle classes and in some cases decline in the authority of the traditional chiefs. These changes have given rise to the ethnicisation of tribes reflected in their ethnic movements. Article 342 mentions 212 Scheduled Tribes in the country. The tribes are found in all parts of the country – all states of north-east India, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Gujarat, Dadra Nagar Haveli and Lakshadweep Islands. The tribals of north-east are called frontier tribes and those of other parts of the country are called non-frontier tribes. Of the entire tribal population 11 per cent are found in north-east India and 89 per cent are found in other regions. Tribals have been involved in the collective action for one or the other goals. (Ghanshyam Shah, pp.92-96).

9.5.2 Tribals of North-East India or the Frontier Tribes

North-East India as a single region has the largest number of the tribal population in the country. They follow different religions especially Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and indigenous religious tenets. They can further be divided between the plain and hill tribes. Almost all state of North-East India have witnessed one or the other forms of ethnic movements. In this sub-section we will deal with some ethnic movements with examples from states of North-East India – Nagaland, Assam and Meghalaya.

It is important to note ethnic issues of North-East India are related to the geographical factors, its regional dimensions. Though there are differences among different tribals of North-East India in terms of their cultural practices, they share common experience of

deprivation due to their regional location. A large amount of literature exists on the North-East which seeks to explain the ethnic problems of the region. But there are wide differences in the discourse on explaining the ethnic issues of the region. And the divide in the discourse also reflect on the basis of the formation of the ethnic identities and the movements in the regions. The problems of the North-eastern region – insurgency, autonomy movements, ethnic conflicts, riots, etc., have been explained by mainly two perspectives: first, the modernisation/development/”nation-state building” perspective and; second, the “federation-building perspective”. The followers of the first perspective largely argue that the problems of the North-East are related to the issues of “nation-state building”; conflict between the new middle classes, especially among the tribals of the region, which has emerged as a result of the modernisation/development/transition (Democratisation) with the traditional leadership; inability of the system to meet the rising aspiration of this group. The main advocates of this perspective are S K Chaube, B P Singh, B G Verghese and Myron Wienor. Most of these writers do not hail from the region. The second perspective is actually the critique of the first one and is available in the writings of the scholars who hail from the region. The principal adherents of this perspective are Sanjib Baruah, Udyan Sharma, Sanjay Hazarika, Sajal Nag, M P Bezbaruah. They argue that problems of the North-East India arose because the nation leadership overlooked the perspective of the people of the region in their quest for “nation-building”. In order to build “nation-state” the central government adopted “step motherly” treatment towards the North-East; ignored the “periphery” and the smaller nationalities; shown arrogant attitude towards them; have been indifferent to the human rights violation in the region. They argue for a “Federation-Building” perspective in place on the “nation-state” building perspective. (Jagpal Singh (2005), “Challenge of Ethnicity to Federalism: Discourse on the North-East India” in Akhtar Majeed (ed.), *Federal India: A Design for Good Governance*, Centre for Federal Studies in association with Manak Publications, New Delhi). The need for a “Federation-building” perspective has been most prominently underlined by Sanjib Baruah in his books *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (Oxford University Press, 1999) and *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of North-East India* (Oxford University Press, 2005). Let us now discuss some examples of Ethnic movements of tribals in North-East India.

The Nagas

Movement of the Nagas which is often referred to as Naga insurgency is called the Naga national movement by the Nagas. It is the oldest movements relating to the ethnicity or the nationality question in the country. The nationality/ethnicity in Nagaland had all dimensions relating to the ethnic movement – demand for autonomy, secession from India and ethnic conflicts. Nagas believe that they form a nation which is different from other ethnic groups or nationalities/nations in India. They had always enjoyed their sovereignty with distinct culture, customs and history. A section among them believe that they have never been part of India and they would like to retain their identity, by joining Indian Union their sovereignty would be compromised. They do not recognise the merger of Nagaland with the Union of India and and consider it as done under coercion. That is why many Nagas did not recognise the Indian Constitution, the VI Schedule meant for the North-East India and participate in the first general election held in 1952.

The Nagas elite consisting of the those educated in the Christian educational institutions and few neighbouring village headmen formed Naga Club in 1918 to take up the social

and administrative problems of the people of Naga Hills. In a memorandum to the Simon Commission in 1929, the Naga Club pleaded to exclude the Nagas from the administrative reforms which it was supposed to recommend and retain the Nagas directly under the British administration. At the initiative of the Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills District, District Tribal Council, an organisation of the individual Naga Councils was formed in 1945. In 1945, the name of the District Tribal Council was changed to the Naga National Council (NNC). The NNC reached an agreement on a 9-point programme with the representative of Government of India, the Governor of Assam, Sir Akbar Hydery on 27-29 June, 1947. The main provisions of the agreement included – protection of tribal land from alienation, creation of administrative autonomy and special responsibility of Government of India to implement the agreement. Asserting that Nagas are a separate nation from India, they announced formation of the Honkin Government or the “People’s Sovereign Republic of Nagaland”. This resulted in violence between the Indian Army and Nagas. This was followed by a 16-point agreement between the Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru and the Nagas in July 1960. This finally led to creation of Nagaland as a separate state on August 1, 1960, out of Assam of which it was a part.

It should be noted that there were differences among the Naga leadership over the issue of Nagaland as a separate state within the Union of India and Nagaland as a sovereign state/nation. The former founded Nagaland Nationalist Organisation (MNO) and the latter formed the Democratic Party of Nagaland. The MNO which was active in getting the Nagaland made a separate state were in favour of giving up the violence and accepting the Constitution of India. The question assumed a new dimension following the signing of Shillong Accord in 1975. According to it the Nagas accepted the Indian Constitution, deposited their arms to the Government of India, and in turn the government released Naga political prisoners and promised their rehabilitation.

The signing of Shillong Accord was not welcome by a section of the Nagas. The latter denounced the Accord for compromising their sovereignty and betraying Christianity. They now sought to mix the issue of Naga sovereignty with Mao’s ideology of socialism and formed National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) led by a Tangkhul Naga T. Muivah and Isak Swu. The NSCN leadership has guided the Naga movement while staying outside India. In their negotiations with the Government of India under the Prime Ministership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh they have raised two main issues – the issue of sovereignty of Nagaland and creation of a *Nagalim*, territory merging all areas of the North-Eastern states where Nagas stay. Apart from Nagaland, these states are Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. They argue that while creating the boundaries of various states, the Government of India merged the territories inhabited by the Nagas into different states. This divided them. They demand that the Nagas should be reunited into *Nagalim*. This demand has provoked opposition from these states. This has repercussion on the ethnic relations within these states. The Nagaland also has witnessed the ethnic riots and conflict between two major tribes of the state – Nagas and Kukis. The former allege that the latter are not the original inhabitants of the state, while the latter refute it.

Bodos of Assam

The tribals of Assam – Bodos, Karbis and Adivasis have been involved in collective ethnic mobilisation since 1980s. The Bodos and Karbis are demanding creation of the

separate states respectively from within the present Assam. The Bodos and Karbis are the indigenous tribes inhabiting their respective habitats. The former are found in lower Assam districts like Kokhrajhar, and Karbis inhabit Karbi Anlong district of the state. The Adivasis consist of tribes like Oraons and Santhals who mainly immigrated to the state during the colonial period as tea plantation labourers principally from Orissa, Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh. Apart from the working as the plantation labourers, they also cultivate land as poor peasants. The Adivasis demand protection of their rights in terms of reservation in the government jobs, protection from the dominant ethnic tribes as there have been several instances of violent ethnic riots between the Bodos and the Adivasis.

The tribals of Assam participated in the six year long Assam agitation led by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) from 1981 to 1985. The movement which was directed against the foreigners united major communities of Assam — tribals and non-tribal Assamese, on the common perception they shared common experience in terms of their belonging to a backward and discriminated state, facing the challenge of the foreign infiltration, especially from Bangladesh and Assam. In the course of time, however, the differences between Bengalis who had been living in the state since the 19th century and were the citizens of the country and the Bengladeshi immigrants got blurred. Led mainly by the students and the middle classes, the movement had become violent on a number of occasions. But as soon as AASU transformed itself into a political party – the Assom Gana Parishad (AGP) and formed the government following its victory in the 1985 assembly elections, the tribes like Bodos and Karbis which had participated in the AASU agitation started agitation for creation of their separate states. They felt that the AASU movement was led by the dominant communities of Assam utilised the support of the smaller tribes like them. Once the AASU signed Assam Accord with the government of India and formed AGP government in the state, the AASU leadership did not give due recognition to the smaller tribes like them and attempted to impose their cultural code on them. They asserted that they were different from the Assamese. Regarding this Sanjiv Baruah quotes a Bodo source saying “We Are Bodos, Not Assamese” in his book *India Against Itself* (Chapter 8). The new generation of leaders provides leadership to the Bodo movement. The All Bodo Student Union (ABSU) presented a 92-point Charter of demands to the government, which included demands for the recognition of their culture, language and providing opportunities for their educational and economic development. For achieving these demands they demand a separate state of Bodoland. It must be noted that like Karbis they also do not question of the sovereignty of the Indian state. Unlike ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) they want a separate state for them within the Union of India under the Constitution of India. They have resorted to violent means targeting the state agencies, especially those belonging to the central government and the armed forces. They have also directed their violence against the Adivasi immigrants, triggering of the ethnic violence. The government has responded by setting up Bodo Autonomous Councils to grant them local autonomy. But it has not responded to their demand for creation of separate state.

Tribes of Meghalaya

Meghalaya has three main tribes – Khais, Jaintias and Garos, who inhabit Khasi, Jaintian and Garo hills of the state. They are distinct for the existence matrilineal system which accords better position to women as compared to the patrilineal found among other communities of India. Like some other tribes of the North-East India, educated Christian

elite had already emerged among them in the state, especially the Khasis during the pre-Independence period. Shillong which remained capital for around a century of Assam, of which areas consisting present Meghalaya state were constituent, provided a suitable place for the growth of an elite section among them. The tribals of Meghalaya have been coexisting with non-tribals in Meghalaya, especially Shillong since the late 19th century, following shifting of the capital of Assam from Cherrapunjee to there. The non-tribals who migrated into Shillong and other parts of Meghalaya since the late 19th century consist of mainly Bengalis, Biharis, Rajasthanis, Sikhs and till formation of Meghalaya as a separate state in 1972, the Assamese. The non-tribals despite their differences form a separate ethnic groups in the sense that their culture, features, customs, etc. are different from those of the tribals.

The 1960s witnessed the movement of the ethnic groups of areas of Assam, which later assumed the form of a separate state of Meghalaya, for creation of a separate. This movement saw the involvement of all ethnic groups – tribals and non-tribals of the region. It was their combined resentment against the language policy of the dominant group, the Assamese. They resisted against the language policy of Assamese government which sought to make the Assamese as a medium of instruction in schools and also an official language. This was seen as an imposition of the Assamese on the non-Assamese including the tribals and the non-tribals. Both set of ethnic groups – tribals and non-tribals jointly participated in the movement for creation of Meghalaya as a separate state.

The relations between the tribals and non-tribals of Meghalaya, however, underwent changes following the formation of the state in 1972. These were now marked by the ethnic divide. The state government in the state introduced land regulations prohibiting the transfer of land from the tribals to non-tribals, reserved seats in the legislative assembly for the tribals (56 out of 60 assembly seats for the tribals), reserved 85 per cent state government jobs for the tribals. This provoked reaction from the non-tribals of the state; who alleged that their contribution to the economy of the state was not recognised and they were being discriminated against. The views of the tribals are articulated specially by the organisations of women, students and politicians, most assertive among them being the Khasi Students Union (KSU) and the Federation of Khasi, Garo and Jaintia people (FKJGP). The KSU and other tribals representatives argue that due to the influx of the outsiders – the non-tribals, their cultural identity is eroded, economic opportunities are exploited. The central government symbolised by the army, central para-military forces is seen to be encroaching upon their rights. Therefore, the tribals of the state demand: the cancellation of trade licenses of the non-tribals, their removal from the state, increase in the reservation for the tribals in the state government jobs, etc. The KSU and other tribal organisations often raise these issues through pamphlets, in the rallies, newspapers, etc. The divide between the ethnic groups also resulted in ethnic riots on some occasion. Since the late 1990s the state has also seen the rise of some insurgent groups.

9.5.3 Tribals of Regions other than North-East India or the Non-Frontier Tribes

The tribals of other regions than the North-East or the Frontier tribes of the states of Madhya Pradesh/Chhattishgarh, Bihar/Jharkhand, Gujarat, Rajasthan and several others

states have been mobilised on ethnic lines on several occasions. In modern history their revolt had been conspicuous against the intervention of the British authorities in the power of the tribal chiefs and against exploitation of their natural resources by the British and their collaborators such as the outside businessmen and bureaucrats or *dikus*. The tribal chiefs mobilised their fellow tribals in order to restore their power and resources and evoked their golden past in order to retain their ethnic identity and autonomy. The British administration retaliated against these movements with ruthless violence including assassination of the leaders of these movements. Birsa Munda revolt in Chhota Nagpur was among the most prominent of such movements during the pre-Independence period. Such movements have been termed as “millenarian movements” by K S Singh.

The issues which formed the basis of collective mobilisation of the non-frontiers tribals in the post-independence period have varied from state to state. These have included the movements for creation of separate states for the tribals out of the existing states like Jharkhand out of Bihar and Chhattisgarh from Madhya Pradesh or separate districts within the same state like demand by the Dang tribes for creation of a separate state within former Bombay state; against the encroachment of tribal land for the creation of dams resulting in the displacement like in the Narmada Valley. Some scholars have observed that during the 1990s the tribals have been mobilised by the Hindutva forces against the Christian and Muslim tribals in some states, especially Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. This contributed to the division of the tribals on the communal basis (Shah, 2004; p.98).

The movement for autonomy expressed in the form of demands for separate states, districts out of present states or creation of autonomous administrative bodies are among the most commonly raised demands of the tribal movements. The basis for such demands are their grievances against the dominant for political formations: their cultural and linguistic identities are under the threat of erosion; their economic resources and opportunities are appropriated by others/outside; they are not given due recognition, etc. The tribal leadership, both traditional and modern, mobilises the tribals into collective actions. The acceptance of their demands depends on the political circumstances. But once a set of demands is accepted, the leadership looks for other issues. For example, after the creation of separate state of Jharkhand out of Bihar, the tribal leaders attempted to change the domicile laws. Similarly, after the creation of a separate state of Meghalaya, the tribal leadership introduced legislation changing the rules regarding inheritance and transfer of land. Thus, the ethnic mobilisation is a continuous process in a democracy.

9.6 SUMMARY

To sum up, mobilisation of the people on the basis of markers, real or imagined, which they share – language, religion, culture, customs, race, etc. into collective is called ethnic mobilisation. Ethnic communities in such situation relate and compare themselves to other ethnic communities and have grievances which they want to get resolved. Ethnic mobilisation finds expression in the form of self-determination movements – autonomy movements, cessation, insurgency or ethnic conflicts. The tribals of India have been involved in ethnic mobilisation for different purposes both before and after independence. They have taken recourse to both the violent and non-violent means. Success or failure of ethnic movements depend on political factors. Once one set of demands in ethnic mobilisation is accepted, in due course time on other demands the ethnic movements start. Thus, ethnic mobilisation is a continuous political process.

9.7 EXERCISES

- 1) Explain the meaning of ethnic mobilisation and discuss the approaches to study it.
- 2) Give a general view of the ethnic mobilisation during the post-colonial period.
- 3) Discuss the general features of tribal ethnic movements in North-East India.
- 4) Write a note on the ethnic movements of the non-frontier tribes.