UNIT 17  POLITICS OF COMMUNITY IDENTITIES

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17.1  INTRODUCTION

Recorded human history is the history of struggle for power and resources. For purposes of waging this struggle, the prerequisites were formation of groups and communities. Religion, race, caste, tribe, colour etc. emerged as the bases of mobilisation of people into separate communities. Over a period of time the sustenance of these communities became a vested interest, hence its identities’ consciousness became its integral part. Community identities are one of the major dilemmas confronting humanity at a time when the world is experiencing deeper forms of global interdependence. The very issue is responsible for the emergence of new forms of war-fare—local wars and proxy wars in national as well as international arenas. While facing the crisis situation these identities are also responsible for the autonomist, separatist and secessionist movements which pose a direct challenge to the existing nation-state system. In other words, there is hardly a region in the world which is unaffected by this phenomenon of assertions of community identities.

17.2  DEFINITION AND STRUCTURE OF COMMUNITY IDENTITIES

17.2.1  What are “Community Identities’? 

The notion of community identities is a very complex phenomenon. As Thomas Bender writes:

A community involves a limited number of people in a somewhat restricted social space or network held together by shared understandings and a sense of obligation. Relationships are close, often intimate, and usually face-to-face. Individuals are bound together by affective or emotional ties rather than by a perception of individual self-interest. There is a “we-ness” in a community; one is a member.
Following Bender’s definition of community one may view that the members of a specific social entity share common signs and symbols, customs and values, attitudes and attributes and claim their distinctiveness as a community. Thus we can conclude that community identities reflect the belongingness of a person to a specific community and that the social entity has an independent existence and is distinct from the other communities. Variables like language, dress, food, folklore, festivals, customs, architecture and other institutions, as Armstrong opines, mark out the boundaries of these communities and serve as a guard to keep alive their distinctiveness.

17.2.2 Structure of Community Identities

Communities construct their identity around the objective factors such as territorial locations, a shared historical memory, shared traditions, common rituals and practices and a common language and a real or perceived common ancestry. These factors evoke the feelings of belongingness among the community members. However, the structure of these feelings may be, as Neera Chandhoke argues,” unexpressed, subterranean, unrealised or unarticulated”. Commenting on the formal and informal structure of identity of a community, Joshua A. Fishman argues that this is a matter of ‘being’, ‘doing’ and ‘knowing’. First of all, as a matter of ‘being’, there should be a formal existence of a body of people who share the intergenerational links to their common ancestors and should evolve around the above given objective factors. Second, as a matter of doing, identity of a community demands authentic activities and behaviour from its members for which a community is known in the external sphere. In other words, community identities demand its members to perform their intra-community obligations and roles. Third, the issue of knowing refers to identity consciousness which means that members of a community keep an understanding as to who they are, where they came from and what they should do in an identifiable situation. In brief, we may say that they know the difference between insiders and outsiders.

17.2.3 Features of Identity of Community

The features of community identities are given as below:

i) Some of the community identities are natural and cannot be changed. One becomes member of such communities by having born therein. These kinds of identities are based on caste, race, ethnic, religious or tribal factors.

ii) It may be possible that the community members have multiple identities, but the importance of anyone depends on the time and situation. Thus, these are situational in nature.

iii) Identities are a product of collective consciousness, contact amongst the members of a community, aloofness and isolation from other communities. Thus these are relational.

iv) Some of the identities are wholly voluntary and are made by choice of individuals. To be the member of a specific business community is a matter of individual choice and decision and may transcend man-made barriers.

Thus, in brief, we may say that community identities are natural, situational, relational and contextual in nature.
17.3 INTRODUCTION

Causes of Identity Consciousness and Conflicts among the Communities

At a time when science and technology have shrunk the world into a global village in terms of accessibility and interdependence, there also is an upward trend amongst the people organising on communal lines. They are increasingly becoming conscious of their cultural roots, their fraternal ties and are organising themselves into communities which otherwise are considered a primitive form of social organisation. People all over the world are becoming increasingly conscious of their communal identities. The most developed Canada, USA and UK, least developed and poor India and Bhutan, old Russia and new Bangladesh; democratic Belgium and authoritarian Sudan, Marxist Leninist China and militantly anti-Marxist Turkey, predominantly Buddhist Burma, Christian Spain, Moslem Iran, Hindu Nepal and Judaic Israel are all afflicted with this phenomena. There are numerous causes that give rise to the identity consciousness and identity based conflicts among the various communities in the world. These can be categorised as under:

i) Colonialism: The process of colonisation, which began with the industrial revolution, is a key factor that has led to the identity consciousness among the diverse communities and also to the inter-community conflicts. During the colonial period, in colonial societies, colonial masters adopted the policy of divide and rule. For this purpose, they introduced the census system, identified the various ranked and unranked communities and made it centre of their policy formulation. They appeased the fractured populations in the military and civil institutions by providing them jobs on the communal lines. Further, these communities got representation in the legislative and executive bodies through the quota system. Different communal, ethnic and casteist brigades were encouraged to maintain their external symbols. However during the situation of revolt against the colonial empire by one, another brigade or community was used which created the historical enmities among the communities. Thus, the whole process has given rise to identity consciousness and identity conflicts among various communities and also vis-à-vis the state.

ii) The Role of Religious Movements: During 18th and 19th centuries, some religious movements came into being. The aim of these movements was to protect religion from the external threat posed by the Christian missionaries and to restore the declining religious values. For this purpose religious preachers gave the knowledge of their glorious past to the community members and made efforts to restore that lost honour and dignity of their community. However, some of these religious movements became a threat to the communal identity of other communities as they involved themselves in the process of conversion and started to manipulate and misinterpret their common inter-communal heritage. Thus, in this situation reaction was common and natural from the threatened communities. For example, the efforts of Arya Samaj to treat Sikhism as part of larger Hindu religion, threatened the identity of the Sikhs as a separate religious community. As such the Singh Sabha Movement emerged as a crusader of a separate Sikh identity beginning in 1870s.
iii) **Irrational and Hard Inter-State Borders:** Identity consciousness and identity conflicts are also a product of colonial construction of arbitrary and irrational borders to suit their convenience. In fact, during the process of colonisation, due to the territorial quest, the colonial masters changed the external borders of their colonies arbitrarily, illogically and irrationally through wars, annexations and partitions. This divided the same community into two or more political units across the international borders. However, due to the soft border approach of colonial masters, this did not become an obstacle in the way of community’s daily life. This division of the communities across the colonial borders in no way posed any threat to the identity of the community across the border. There was a normal and regular movement of community members across the borders, despite their division. However, in the post-colonial era, the new ruling elite adopted the hard borders concept making interaction across the border impossible thus threatening the solidarity and identity of the communities divided by the irrational borders. It affected the community life adversely as fragmented colonial culture came into being due to these hard and irrational political borders which ignored the psychological affinity and psychological communal borders which lay elsewhere.

iv) **Emergence of Modern Big State and Loss of Autonomy:** In the pre-colonial and colonial periods, various communities had functioned as autonomous political entities even when they were politically part of various empires and kingdoms. With few exceptions, the empires and kingdoms did not interfere in their autonomous and natural communal life. In fact in an informal way they recognised their social and political distinctiveness in the multi-national empires and showed a great respect for the intra-communal life. The colonial rulers followed the same policy, by installing puppet regimes and recognising community rights in the socio-economic and political field. However, in the post-colonial era, this autonomous status of these communities came to an abrupt end. In the name of state-formation and to establish its complete sovereignty in its own territorial framework, the ruling elite started to take over centralisation of administration. The emergence of the ‘Big State’, with all pervasive authority to the farthest fringe of the social hierarchy and to the minutest details, have played havoc to the traditional autonomy these groups enjoyed since times immemorial. As such group rights were swept under the carpet. The personal laws of these communities came to be replaced with the new state legal system, which otherwise was scientific, non-communal and non-historical in nature. Further the state imposed modern but majority oriented institutions over these communities at the cost of destruction of their own traditional natural and historical communal institutions. In such an atmosphere, the autonomous life of the communities came to an end which created a widespread discontent among the communities especially among those which are small in size.

v) **Fear of Assimilation and Homogenisation:** Some of these communities feared assimilation and homogenisation of their distinct identities by the majority community both regional as well as national. To counter such a possibility they articulated their demand for territoriality based on their distinctiveness. For example the *Bado Kacharis*, an Indo-Mongolid community with strong cultural moorings feared, that they might face the same fate as that of many other plain tribal communities, which
over the years got assimilated into the larger Assamese fold, if their territory was not clearly demarcated and recognised.

vi) Inferior-Superior Syndrome: In hierarchical societies, which may be partly rooted in historical relations of a feudal, caste or racial nature and partly shaped by modern state’s policies are defined by the location of a community in the social hierarchy. Many times, these social hierarchical relations lead to inferior-superior syndrome. Members of the inferior communities are dominated, despised, degraded and discriminated against through social behaviour and also through state policies dominated by the superior community. The black community identity consciousness in the United States is the product of white superiority. Such relations affect the community’s consciousness and form the basis for political action. For example Black-White relations in South Africa and upper caste-lower caste relations in India, can be put in this category very well.

vii) Fear of Marginalisation: Another cause of identity consciousness among the different communities is the fear of marginalisation, because of the domination of an out group/community over the indigenous people. An out-community is one, which lacks a historical linkage with the territory they inhabit along with the indigenous people but become a part of it due to the voluntary migration or state-sponsored project of demographic engineering. The very policy aims to neutralise the position of indigenous community and reduce it to a minority in its own territory viz., Red Indians in North and South Americas, Maoris in New Zealand and Aborigines in Australia. In this situation, inter-community competition becomes inevitable because it threatens the interests of the indigenous community. The ‘sons of the soil’ theory is a direct product of this fear of marginalisation.

viii) Sense of Relative Deprivation and Discrimination: Denial of equality by the state in economic and political fields also creates a sense of discrimination and deprivation among the communities. Some communities are discriminated against in job sector and/or are deprived of their natural rights vis-à-vis the other communities. They have not got proper representation in national life and governmental institutions. It is perceived as internal colonialism by the victim community. Minority communities are always at the risk of deprivation in power, services and resources.

ix) Sense of Powerlessness: This is primarily the direct outcome of the majoritarian-minoritarian syndrome. It leads to permanent deprivation of the minority communities from the state power and resources. It is sought to be justified through the democratic logic. It can be categorised into two sets:

a) In one set, the national majority may be a regional minority which is pitted against a regional majority but a national minority viz. Hindus constitute a national majority but are a regional minority in Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir.

b) In the second set, a regional majority may be a national minority which is pitted against national majority but a regional minority viz. Muslims constitute a regional majority in Jammu and Kashmir but are a national minority and Sikhs are a regional majority in the Punjab but are a national minority.
In competitive relations power plays a crucial role. Thus struggle for power between two communities could be seen at national and regional levels. The regional majorities always seek devolution/decentralisation of powers whereas regional minorities support centralisation of power and oppose the regional majorities particularly when the regional minority is a national majority. This sense of powerlessness both, in regional as well as national levels, promote the cause of community identity consciousness.

x) **Flawed Approach at Nation-Formation:** The flawed approach at nation-formation in third world states is also responsible for the emergence of community conflicts. In fact, in the process of nation-building the ruling elite adopted telescoped and short cut methods perceiving assimilation and homogenisation as a pre-condition and by destroying the historically evolved structure of these communities. Resistance on the part of minorities to this homogenisation project is labelled as a threat to national unity and integrity, hence anti-national. For this purpose, state, on the pattern of ‘Civic Nation’, failed to evolve common symbols, ceremonies, festivals and institutions. In fact the state decided to create a nation, which was based on the values of a specific dominant/majority community. For this purpose the state adopted all ceremonies, institutions, symbols and festivals of the dominant/majority community and declared them as the issue of national pride. On the other hand, local cultures, histories, languages, institutions and symbols were not only relegated but efforts were also made to destroy and degenerate them. Thus this flawed approach, to create a non-historic, non-civic and dominant community oriented nation, at the cost of historically grown natural nations, was totally rejected by the marginalised minority communities.

xi) **Modernisation:** As the process of modernisation unfolds itself it creates conditions of social mobilisation—both territorial as well as non-territorial. It is in direct opposition to the rarest ever consensus among sociological theories of modernisation, liberalism and Marxists that the process of modernisation will lead to assimilation of the separate communities into a modern cosmopolitan identity. They argued that as mankind moved from primitive tribal stage of social organisation to complex industrial and post-industrial structures, the primordial ties of religion, language, ethnicity, caste, colour, race etc. would gradually lose hold and disappear. Instead modern means of audio-visual mass media and communication have created parochial consciousness on unprecedented scale. Modernisation produces alienation which leads to the strengthening of primordial community based ties. Modernisation has also produced political and economic competition on an unprecedented scale whereby elite mobilise the members of their community to have due share in power and resources in competition with other groups. Modernisation sharpens differentiation, articulates group identity consciousness, and produces intra-group and inter-group competition which often degenerates into communal conflict and violence.

xii) **Role of Community’s Leadership:** In the context of communal identity consciousness and inter-community conflicts, the role of leadership cannot be overlooked. Often, it has been seen that when the elite class of a community faces any threat to its interests from another community, in a bid to mobilise the members of its community it articulates that the situation is a threat to the existence of the
community. The elite class projects its self-interests as the communal interests and also gives a call for struggle against the real or perceived threat. For example in Punjab, Akalis have raised the slogan of “Panth in danger” many times in this context.

17.4 METHODS AND STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY THE COMMUNITIES

The communities under real or perceived threat have developed various types of methods and strategies to protect their identity and interests. Monserrat Guibernau has discussed the two major strategies which have been used by the communities. They are given below:

17.4.1 Cultural Resistance

All the communities, struggling against the majorities and biased states, have used cultural resistance commonly. In the cultural resistance, communities have been using all sorts of signs and symbols of their identity. The communities have adopted the strategy of cultural resistance in both private as well as public spheres. This includes democratic and undemocratic type of actions to get massive support. In the private sphere, the community members in the family and friends’ circles primarily carry out resistance. In this case the specific and differentiating characteristics of the community such as language, history and culture are disseminated to the illiterate and ignorant members of the community through formal as well as informal channels. But in public sphere, they resist through the following four types of actions:

a) **Symbolic Actions:** These types of actions are performed by small groups or even by single individuals. The main objective of such actions is to break the control of the oppressive regime over the public space. These actions are performed in the streets and addressed to all witnesses. Graffiti and flags are often displayed in this type of actions.

b) **Interference Actions:** The community members execute these actions during the course of public events. The aim of such actions is to challenge the regime at its core and disrupt the symbols, which show that homogeneity has been achieved. These actions are implied in high degree of risky situations because on such occasions high security arrangements are in place to prevent any sort of disturbance. Through these actions community members, not only address those who attend the public events, but also seek the attention of the international community through international media and foreign representatives. These actions have proved very useful for the communities to put the diplomatic pressure on the ruling elite from the international civil society and international human rights organisations to resolve the problems of communal tensions in a peaceful and democratic way.

c) **Elite Actions:** A small-devoted elite class within the community carries out these actions. As the aim of elite class is the development and maintenance of community culture and other symbolic values, they work a lot in this direction. They inform the
community members about the identity crises and appeal to them to make the supreme sacrifice for the community’s interests. For this purpose, community leadership organises various conferences and seminars. Scholars discuss the problem through numerous seminars and publish literature, which provide knowledge of the traditional glory of that community and ask members to work diligently to enhance the dignity of that community. They also identify and articulate threats to the identity or interests of the community and suggest the necessary steps and strategy to counter the same.

d) **Solidarity Actions**: Solidarity actions are prepared by the community elite to mobilise the community members to achieve mass participation in the community affairs. The main purpose of these actions is to show the strength of the community by focusing upon a particular demand and presenting it as something that cannot be denied due to the massive support, it receives. For example, protests, demonstration and morchas by the Akali Dal during Punjabi Suba Movement and thereafter for Anandpur Sahib Resolution by the Akalis to mobilise the Sikh community. However, these actions take place when a relative attenuation of the oppressive nature of the regime allows some breaches to make and the population dares them together challenging the power of the state. Interestingly, these kinds of breaches are allowed to be made by only those states, which pretend to be democratic before the international community.

Through cultural resistance, a few communities have succeeded to secure their identity at a certain level as some states have adopted positive measures to accommodate the community claims within the constitutional parameters.

### 17.4.2 Armed Struggle

In most of the cases, where states failed to satisfy the communities through the constitutional arrangements, the communities resort to aspiring for a separate state of its own provoking the state to military crackdowns to check the separatist designs of a community. In such a scenario the hawks in the community gain upper hand by taking armed struggle. They choose one out of two following options (i.e. target attacks and total war) to use armed force against the state:

a) **Target Attacks**: Target attacks are the most common option which is used by the different communities especially by those who are relatively weak, and do not have sufficient resources to fight against the state. Through this, communities make state’s property, territory and institutions target of their attacks. They also target all those symbols, which are showpieces of the state tyranny and oppression. By this option, the communities also target the public places regardless of allegiance and characteristics of possible victims, which create a sense of insecurity among the people. Political killings, illegal and open firing or bomb blasts in public places, buses, trains, and aero planes are a common form of these target attacks. Recent developments in this context have been of resorting to use of human bombs, highjacking and suicidal attack. These also show the vulnerability and incapacity of the state to control the use of violence by others on its own territory. The international
media has also raised the issue of community tensions, because of these events. Further, it has forced the state to create clandestine paramilitary forces, private armies, death squads and other machineries for the safety of public property and institutions.

b) **Total War:** Total war is another option, which is often used by the communities as a means to employ the force against the state for the acceptance of their demands. This method is adopted by those communities, which have a strong economic and military support base, and in the states, which are not in complete effective control of their territory. In this type of war, irregular armed militia of the community fight with the professional soldiers of the state and attempt to break away from the state. The main feature of total wars especially in third world states is that in it communities use high technology weapons and are also making systematic and planned attacks on the civilians to weaken the state system. The communities located on the international borders or having access to sea coast are able to get liberal support from external powers. The foreign powers are supporting them by providing economic support, weapons training and planning etc. With the help of external forces these communities have succeeded in internationalising their demands and put the pressure on their respective governments. In some cases, communities have succeeded in replacing their governments. In some cases, they have secured territorial control over the major parts and have become the de facto rulers of those parts of the state. For example by the use of military force against the state, LTTE have gained control of much of Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka and Abkhazians over the whole of Abkhazia province in Georgia. In certain cases they have also succeeded in the territorial disintegration of the state. As a result of this, these communities have been able to form new nation-states in the world. The total war has led to a anarchical situation in these states. It has affected the development process, adversely. Further, this has also created an acute problem of refugees and state-less citizens, which has affected the foreign policy of different states, on a large scale. In some cases the states took external help to control the situation. In situation of civil war, international organisations particularly the United Nations have also taken some steps to control the situation in the form of peacekeeping operations. But these efforts are not much effective because communities are not satisfied with the existing arrangements and thus are fighting for the protection of their primordial identities and against the discriminatory attitude of the state.

### 17.5 CONCLUSION

The assertions of community identities and resultant political phenomena have affected the nature, bases and patterns of politics both at national as well as international planks. At the national level it has resulted in unprecedented conflict and violence resulting to death and destruction and uprooting of people leading to internal refugees. It has re-demarcated internal borders and effected changes therein. It has led to parochialisation of politics and there is an increasing awareness of group or community rights. At the international level it has led to the changes in international borders and refugee problem of unprecedented proportions. Domestic jurisdiction of the member states of the UN which was assiduously made impregnable under article 2, clause 7 of the UN charter
has ceased to be so with UN forces deployed in over 40 nations for peace-keeping, peace-making and peace-enforcing missions. Minority rights are high on the agenda of international community. The fragmentation of polities into communities has created a situation whereby minorities of the world are in a majority. It has challenged the traditional barriers between domestic and foreign policy and nationalism and internationalism.

### 17.6 SUMMARY

Community identities are a major dilemma confronting today’s world. These identities give rise to autonomist, separatist and secessionist movements which pose a direct challenge to the existing nation-state system. Community identities are natural (by birth), situational (depend on the time and situation), relational (depending on collective consciousness or isolation) and contextual (depending on individual decisions) in nature. Identity consciousness and conflicts have arisen due to colonial policies of divide and rule, religious movements, construction of arbitrary and irrational borders by colonial powers to suit their convenience, community leadership portraying situations as a threat to the community, loss of autonomy of the small communities with rise of a modern state leading to fear of assimilation, marginalisation and powerlessness. To overcome these real or perceived threats, communities have developed strategies. This unit discusses two major strategies—cultural resistance and armed struggle.

The increasing awareness and assertion of community identities has resulted in unprecedented conflict and violence, re-demarcation of internal borders and has crossed all national borders.

### 17.7 EXERCISES

1) Explain how communities construct their identity.

2. Define ‘community identities’. What are the causes of conflicts among various communities?

3. What are the strategies adopted by communities to confront perceived or real threats to their interests?