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# UNIT 18 FORMS OF ETHNICITY

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## Learning Objectives

After going through this unit, the learner will be able to:

- Define the concept of ethnicity;
- Describe the various forms of ethnicity in the context of inter-ethnic relations; and
- Examine tribe, religion, language, region and culture as different forms of ethnic groups.

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## 18.1 INTRODUCTION

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Anthropology as a discipline and as a discourse has been associated and is still with understanding variations. The fundamental dichotomy that lies at the base of the emergence of the discipline of anthropology is the dichotomy of the self and the other. The Europeans way back in the fifteenth century with the development of navigation technology were very much fascinated to see the other in different lands that they visited through the sea route. With such experiences of the other, an attempt was made to define the self-concerning the other. The other i.e., the non-European was also defined by the people who were attempting to reconstruct a universal history of humankind. This way of looking at human social and cultural variation is very different from the way that is studied and conceptualised under the rubrics of ethnicity. Ethnicity is essentially a concept that is based upon an emic understanding of the self rather than an imposed labelling from the outside. This gives dynamism to the concept of ethnicity as in this way it can take as many forms as there can be criteria for defining the self. This self is actually the collective consciousness of people regarding their common language, culture and ancestry. In this sense, the concept of ethnicity forms the core of anthropological understanding of human variation.

In another important sense, ethnicity as a concept relates to the core dimension of anthropological holism. A concept can be understood in its totality only when different

forms of it are also studied and analysed. Anthropology has done it with concepts like society and culture. In order to understand the concept of society it is imperative to know about different forms or types of societies. The same is the case with the concept of ethnicity. In order to get a holistic picture of the concept, different forms of ethnicity should be understood. As mentioned earlier, ethnic identities are based upon different dimensions. This gives rise to different forms of ethnicity. Groups of people may claim their exclusive identities based upon different dimensions that may be evoked in order to establish commonness.

Ethnicity has been defined as a social identity that is based upon fictive kinship. The idea of common ancestry is at the core of the concept of ethnicity. It is also regarded as an emic category of ascription. This means that ethnic identities are ascribed and are also self-imposed. Ethnicity has also been distinguished from other overlapping concepts of nation and race on account of territory and biological determinism respectively. Nation as a concept is different from ethnicity on account of being based upon territory. Ethnic identities and affinities on the other hand are beyond territory. Similarly, race is different from ethnicity on account of being based on biology. Although race as a concept has lost its scientific validity, nevertheless, it linked biology with behaviour. Ethnicity on the other hand is a concept with no biological determinants. However, at one point of time in the initial explanation of ethnicity, it was defined as a concept similar to that of race. Moreover, in the present context, race is also seen as a social construct with no biological basis. Some scholars, therefore, consider it futile to distinguish between race and ethnicity. However, others have tried to distinguish between the two by saying that race is a negative concept of categorising people whereas ethnicity is a positive concept of group identification (Banks, 1996).

Ethnic groups have largely been defined based on three distinct criteria viz:

1. The presence of similar objective and verifiable attributes and characters.
2. Presence of a subjective feeling of collective consciousness and
3. At the level of behaviour.

The objective characters include language, territory, religion, tribe, dress pattern etc. Such criteria are also known as ethnic markers that distinguish one ethnic group from the other. The second criterion is related to the subjective feeling of self-consciousness. It is an assumed or imagined identity of commonness. It is also important to note here that the sense of commonness may not be based upon real ancestry. A belief in the common descent is all that is important to give a distinct identity to a group. The third criteria relate to the behaviour of ethnic groups concerning other ethnic groups. This is at the level of interaction between different ethnic groups. Such behaviours may include friendship behaviour, marriage patterns, kinship behaviour, ritual behaviour etc. It should also be kept in mind that the three criteria are not mutually exclusive in nature but are dependent upon each other. A subjective feeling of one-ness is largely dependent upon the presence of similar objective attributes and this, in turn, will affect the pattern of behaviour between different ethnic groups. It should also be noted that the presence of an ethnic group is always in relation to other ethnic groups. Ethnicity in this sense is associated with intergroup dynamics (Eriksen, 1994).

Ethnicity as a concept has been divided into two separate kinds viz- cultural and political. The cultural conception of ethnicity is related to the cultural identities of groups based upon language, customs, rituals, institutions etc. From a functional perspective in

anthropology, this identity formation functions to maintain the social system in a multi-ethnic surrounding. People get a sense of identity-based on common cultural attributes. This helps in sustaining groups in crises. On the other hand, the political conception of ethnicity is related to the political awareness and identity for mobilising ethnic groups for achieving common goals. In this sense, ethnic groups become interest groups. Certain minority groups in this way try to achieve specific goals for their own groups as they might feel deprived in relation to other ethnic groups. Their demands may range from the inclusion of a particular language into the constitution to demanding separate statehood where they can have their own political and administrative arrangements (Brass, 1991).

In anthropology, a distinction needs to be made between the terms tribe and ethnic groups. As we have tried to define ethnic groups above, it is clear that there is a greater degree of overlap with what we mean by a tribe in anthropological literature. One might argue that what we are defining as ethnic groups are also the characteristics of the term tribe as tribes have also been defined and understood in much the same way as we understand ethnic groups. This raises the question that how we can distinguish between a tribal group from an ethnic group. One of the answers to this intriguing question is that tribal groups in anthropology have been studied in isolation. Tribes for a very long time have been conceptualised as isolated, homogeneous groups with no or limited external contacts. On the other hand, ethnic groups are always understood in terms of other ethnic groups around. Ethnic groups can never be studied in isolation as the basic meaning of the term ethnic is always in relation to some other group. It should also be kept in mind that ethnic groups have been defined in a discrete manner which might give an impression that they are discrete groups but whenever we try to study or understand ethnic groups then it is always in relation to other such groups. Eriksen (1994) writes- “By definition, ethnic groups remain more or less discrete, but they are aware of – and in contact with – members of other ethnic groups (pp- 14).” This also suggests that the very creation of ethnic groups depends upon contact with other groups. Therefore, there is a central dimension of inter-ethnic relations that forms the core of the concept of ethnicity and ethnic groups.

Another way in which anthropologists have distinguished between a tribe and an ethnic group is that the concept of tribes has been considered to be ethnocentric as it always implies that there is a group that is in sharp contrast to the Europeans who started studying tribes in order to understand themselves in a better way. The concept of a tribe has been considered a colonial construct that defined various groups of people in British colonies. Compared to this, the concept of the ethnic group does not invoke such sharp distinctions as we all belong to some or the other ethnic group.

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## 18.2 FORMS OF ETHNICITY IN THE CONTEXT OF INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS

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As it has been defined that ethnicity as a concept is relational as it talks about relations between various ethnic groups, this brings us to understand various forms of ethnic relations. Eriksen (1994) has identified five major forms of inter-ethnic relationships which are as follows:

1. *Modern Migrants*- This group includes people who have migrated from Asia, Africa and other continents to Europe and America. Studies conducted on

modern migrants have focused on the problems faced by immigrants in order to adapt to the new surroundings and culture. Issues of discrimination on the basis of race, language, religion etc. have been studied under this category of inter-ethnic relations. Identity management and culture change also form an important part of such studies.

2. *Indigenous People*- Within this category studies focus on the ethnic relations between the various tribal/indigenous/aboriginal groups and the so-called mainstream culture. Issues of political identity assertions by indigenous people in the backdrop of the larger dominant political scenario form the basis of such studies.
3. *Proto-nations (ethno-nationalist movements)*- According to Eriksen, some ethnic groups demand a separate nation for their people. They have their own leadership dedicated to getting separate nationhood. Examples of such groups include Kurds, Palestinians and Sri Lankan Tamils (LTTE). Such groups are averse to the fact that they are being ruled by the 'other' and therefore their demand centres around self-rule. Such groups have also been defined as 'nations without the state.'
4. *Ethnic Groups in Plural Societies*- It has been argued that most contemporary states are plural societies. Typically, plural societies have been defined as "colonially created states with culturally heterogeneous populations." Within the umbrella of nation-states, ethnic groups do come under the larger political and economic system, but they think themselves to be different from each other. This leads to a kind of group competition. In some extreme cases, such groups may also demand a separate nationhood.
5. *Post-Slavery Minorities*- Here Eriksen is talking about the descendants of slaves in the New World. Ancestors of these people were only recognised as slaves devoid of any other kind of alternative identities. Descendants of these slaves organised themselves into minority ethnic groups as they shared feelings of discrimination and suffering. Their identity politics was based upon a shared sense of uprooting and suffering.

Forms of ethnicity in the context of inter-ethnic relations will give a basis for understanding and analysing various ethnic relations cross-culturally. Understanding the forms of ethnic relations will also help in getting a full view of the concept of ethnicity itself. Various kinds of inter-ethnic relations mentioned above also form a theoretical basis for understanding the operational dimensions of various forms of ethnicity like language, region, religion, tribe, culture etc. Ethnicity based upon language, tribe, religion and region lead to inter-ethnic relations that may take one of the five forms mentioned above. For example, ethnic groups in plural societies may be formed based on language. Similarly, modern migrants may form ethnic groups based on the region to which they belong. Indigenous groups may come together on the basis of common ancestry or due to sharing similar cultural traits.

This now brings us towards understanding various forms of ethnicity-based upon some concrete criterion of language, tribe, religion, region and culture. We will discuss each one of them and will try to understand the kinds of ethnic relations that get generated due to differences in language, tribal groups, religious groups, region and culture.

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## 18.3 ETHNICITY AND TRIBES

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As it has already been stated above that the concept of tribe is different from the concept of ethnicity in that the term tribe denotes a very isolated whole as compared to the term ethnicity which denotes relations between groups claiming separate identities. This has been especially true for the tribes in North-East (N-E) India. There have been a number of factors that have led to the formation of various ethnic groups out of the various tribes in the N-E. There have been several movements in the N-E led by various tribal groups that were mainly based upon the assertion of ethnic identities. A major difference that has been delineated between the tribal movement in middle India from that of the N-E is that, in middle India, tribal movements were largely agrarian movements, but on the other hand movements in the N-E were basically identity-based. There are two very important reasons behind this viz:

1. Partial or complete isolation of the people of the N-E from the outside influence as a result of the British policy of formation of excluded and partially excluded areas and
2. Impact of Christian missionaries as a result of British influence.

These two factors have led to the formation of a separate identity and an increased sense of identity assertions as a result of western education. As India gained independence, most of the tribal groups felt that their interests will be hampered on account of their distinct identity and needs that are different from so-called mainstream India. For example, one of the factors behind the Naga movement was a fear that their cultural or ethnic identity will be eroded. This became one of the rallying points for the Nagas to demand a sovereign Naga state divorced from the Indian union (Singh, 1982).

Another example of the assertion of ethnic identity in the N-E is the case of Assam. Gohain (2014) has explained that very recently there have been several groups in Assam that have started claiming the status of the scheduled tribe. This they want to achieve by claiming a separate ethnic identity in terms of having separate cultural traits that can distinguish them from other such groups that are having similar claims. The tribal groups in Assam are not interested in joining the mainstream and are claiming their own separate identity.

Tribal ethnicity has not only led to the formation of separate discrete groups but has also led to a kind of ranking among the various ethnic groups. This leads to the stratification of various ethnic groups. Stratified groups are also status groups. A certain degree of honour and prestige is attached to such status groups in relation to other similar groups. There are cultural differences between groups that are used as markers of ethnic identities. Groups are mobilised on such a shared understanding of oneness. Such mobilisations are for gaining access to resources and eventually moving upwards in the stratified system. As far as tribes are concerned, then various tribal groups compete for resources in order to move up in the hierarchy. They may emphasise the superiority of their cultural traits and languages.

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## 18.4 ETHNICITY AND RELIGION

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Anthropologists have defined religion as 'belief in spiritual being.' Religion is related to beliefs and practices associated with something supernatural. Durkheim has defined

religion in terms of beliefs and practices related to sacred things that bind people into a moral community called 'church.' There are two dimensions to these definitions- one is that they talk about religion in terms of certain beliefs and practices and the second that is important to us in the context of ethnicity is that religion binds people into some kind of a moral community or group. This group is a group of believers in a particular ideology. This group of believers may also try to define themselves in opposition or in relation to other such groups. We are all living in plural societies. Such societies are nation-states but within these nation-states, there are different groups of people who practice different religions and have different sets of symbols, beliefs and practices. They also form different conscious groups that try to assert their identity in the context of the presence of other such groups. In this sense, religion takes the shape of an ethnic group. Such ethnic groups pursue their own interests and assert their distinct ethnic identity.

Distinctions or differences in society almost always lead to a kind of hierarchical arrangement. This happens because of differences in the distribution of power and authority across different groups that lead to differential access to limited resources. This becomes the basis of stratification. It is also a reality in today's plural society that on the basis of numerical strength there are groups that form the majority and then there are several groups that become the minority. Most of the time there is one majority and several minority groups. It is quite obvious that the majority group is in control of power and the minorities become victims of prejudice and discrimination (Giddens, 1989).

Religion as an ethnic group can be understood through the example of the mobilisation of Sikhs in Punjab. During the British rule, Punjab saw an emergence of the middle class that tried to assert Sikhism as separate from Hinduism. There were campaigns by the organisations like the Singh Sabha and Chief Khalsa Dewan that tried to define and draw boundaries between the Sikhs and the Hindus. During the 1920s a liberation movement started in Punjab that tried to liberate Sikh Gurudwaras from the clutches of Hindu Mahants. Organisations like the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee and political organisations like the Shiromani Akali Dal were formed during this period. This led to the formation of a separate Sikh identity in Punjab in opposition to the Hindu religious identity (Grewal, 1994).

Even after the independence, when states were formed based on linguistic criteria, Punjab was left undivided. However, due to partition, some parts of Punjab became Sikh dominated as a large population of Sikhs migrated to the Indian side. This led to a mass mobilisation of the Sikhs as they wanted a Sikh dominated state. This happened on September 1, 1966, when Haryana was formed out of regions of Southern Punjab that were dominated by Hindi speaking population as the Punjabi Hindus declined to associate themselves with the Sikh aspirations and Sikhs wanted a Sikh majority state.

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## **18.5 ETHNICITY AND LANGUAGE**

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Language is yet another criterion on the basis of which ethnic identities are defined, asserted and safeguarded. It has been argued for a long that homogeneous societies make better nation-states as they have monolithic affinities. This thesis has been challenged by the case of the Indian sub-continent. The Indian case points to the fact that societies with multi-linguistic affinities do not always show fissiparous tendencies. In other words, India is a case of a nation with multi-linguistic ethnic groups and is

largely stable in terms of a democratic political union. However, this is not the entire picture and as a nation, India is having its own issues related to linguistic ethnic groups. The re-organisation of states based on linguistic affinities is one such example that shows how language becomes a basis for the formation of ethnic groups that have their own political agendas (King, 1997).

Before independence, there were political and administrative units that were not divided into the lines of cultural, historical or linguistic affinities. For example, Madras presidency had populations that spoke Oriya, Malayalam, Telugu, Tamil and Kannada. Similarly, more than fifty per cent of the population of the Bombay presidency spoke a language other than Marathi. However, in the post-independence era, states were re-organised principally on the basis of linguistic affinities. Support for such re-organisations came from Mahatma Gandhi who was in favour of the formation of states or provinces based upon language.

Examples of linguistic ethnicity also come from linguistic movements of the South-India. After Hindi was designated as the official language of India by the Indian Constitution in 1950, a series of agitations started against this. The formation of political parties like the DMK has its base in the linguistic movements against the imposition of Hindi over the Tamil speaking populations. It was contended that Hindi is also a regional language like Tamil as it is only spoken by people of some regions in India. Compulsory knowledge of Hindi was required for some government jobs which was not acceptable to students speaking Tamil. In 1969 there was a huge protest by the DMK on this issue. This and other such agitations led to a policy on language that gave due importance to the other regional languages as well (Eugene, 1969).

Linguistic movements also took place among the tribes in India. The best example can be the case of Santhals of Chota Nagpur. Santhals have developed their own script for the Santhali language. This script is known as 'Ol-Chiki.' One can find books written in Ol-Chiki. In order to promote the Santhali language, films are made in Santhali. One can download Santhali music or songs from the internet and listen to them. Developing a script for a tribal language lead to recording and preserving the history and culture of that particular tribe. This helps in making a separate tribal identity. Similarly in Assam, Mishing tribes have formed language associations in order to promote their language. They have also adopted a Roman script for the Mishing language. The Government of Assam also recognises the Mishing language as a separate language and education is also being imparted in their Mishing language.

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## 18.6 ETHNICITY AND REGION

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Besides tribe, religion and language, a region also forms a very important basis for the formation of ethnic groups. Groups that associate together based on the region have a strong sense of belongingness to a particular area. Such groups may belong to different linguistic lineages, different religions or different tribes but they come together as they have a sense of attachment to a particular region. You have already seen in the case of language and ethnicity that different states were formed based on the difference in linguistic affinities and culture. Similarly, there had been movements for the formation of separate administrative entities and groups have been mobilised on the basis of shared sentiments for a particular region. Ethnicity and region have been understood under the concept of 'regionalism.' Regionalism has been defined as an affinity for a particular region in which certain groups can assert their cultural identity and can run their own affairs with little or no outside interference.

Stereotypes are formed and people are discriminated against based upon their belongingness to a particular region. In the state of Maharashtra, there are political parties that voice their concern about the influx of people from several north Indian states especially Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. People from these states feel that there is a discriminatory attitude against them because they belong to a particular region. Soon after India got independence, Naga tribal groups felt that their interests can only be met if they form a separate nation. Their ethnicity was tied to an area that they wanted to govern. A similar movement was carried out by the tribes for the formation of a separate state called Jharkhand. The Jharkhand movement aimed at the formation of a separate tribal land where tribes can administer their affairs. This movement was based upon the collective consciousness of tribal identity, a sense of belongingness to their own land and a feeling of self-administration.

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## 18.7 ETHNICITY AND CULTURE

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One of the most enduring controversies in the field of ethnic studies is an attempt to define ethnicity in relation to culture. In other words, it has been asked for a long by both students and researchers in the field of anthropology studying ethnicity what is the difference, if any, between the concepts of ethnicity and culture? There is no clear answer to this question as to the definition of ethnicity in itself talks about various cultural characteristics and markers that define different groups. One of the views in this context says that ethnic groups are defined culturally and therefore there exists a deep interrelation between ethnicity and culture. According to this view, it is the culture that defines and determines the boundaries of an ethnic group. Another view takes a different position and says that culture does not define an ethnic group but only has a utilitarian value in terms of dividing or bringing together different ethnic groups.

Scholars have tried to distinguish between the concepts of ethnicity and culture. Eriksen (1994) says that “The anthropology of ethnicity thus may be restricted to studying people’s *perceptions* of their own culture and their actions, instead of studying their culture (pp-67).” This statement suggests that studying ethnicity is different from studying culture. A difference has been made at a very conceptual level. It is said that when we study ethnicity then actually, we are studying people’s perceptions about their own culture and actions. Ethnicity is actually the emic understanding of culture. Eriksen (1994) has stated the following in the context of the concepts of ethnicity and culture:

1. It is widely believed that ethnicity expresses cultural differences. However, there is no direct relation between ethnic differences and cultural differences. This suggests that ethnic differences and cultural differences do not overlap. Two groups can consider themselves ethnically different despite having cultural similarities. For example, ‘Nuer’ studies by Evans Pritchard was thought to be a single cultural unit having cultural similarities, but in reality, there existed different ethnic groups within ‘Nuer.’ People might say that they share cultural similarities with different groups but still may consider themselves as different from others.
2. “Ethnicity is a relationship between two or several groups, not a property of a group; it exists *between* and not *within* groups (pp-68).” Culture on the other hand is a property of a group. Culture exists within a group.
3. Ethnicity is always studied at the level of social interaction between different groups. It is studied at the level of social life and not at the level of symbols.



Culture on the other hand is also studied at the level of symbols. Ethnicity emerges whenever cultural differences are made relevant in a social context.

4. Ethnicity is therefore relational in nature; it is contextual and not absolute as culture is.

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## 18.8 SUMMARY

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Based on the discussion so far, we can say that ethnic identity can be formed on the basis of several factors. Not only that, but ethnic relations can also take different forms. It is important to understand various forms of ethnicity as it helps us in understanding varieties of issues that are negotiated in contemporary plural societies. The plurality of our identity gives rise to various forms of ethnicity. Different ethnic groups are also arranged hierarchically in the society as access to power, authority and resources are unequally distributed among different ethnic groups. Understanding different forms of ethnicity also help us in knowing the dynamics between the majority and minority ethnic groups. There can be majority religious groups and minority groups. Similarly, there can be a majority linguistic group and minority groups based on language. Tribe and region also form different criteria for the formation of ethnic groups. Ethnicity in its totality can be gauged and understood in the light of various forms of ethnic groups.

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**Sample Questions**

1. What do you mean by the term ethnicity?
2. Describe various forms of ethnicities in the context of inter-ethnic relations
3. Comment upon tribes as a form of an ethnic group.
4. Differentiate between ethnicity and culture.
5. How did religion and language become the basis for the formation of ethnic groups?  
Explain with the help of suitable examples.



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