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Ethnicity and Development: The Case of Fiji

Discussion Paper No. 46, October 1993
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Preface

In 1989, UNRISD launched a major research project on Ethnic Conflict and Development. Since then 14 case studies have been carried out in countries experiencing ethnic conflicts in different regions of the world. The research has sought to examine:

- the conditions under which ethnic conflicts arise and sustain themselves;
- the roles of economic, cultural, social and political factors in shaping ethnic consciousness and claims;
- the effects of development processes, state policies and international politics on the dynamics of ethnic conflicts;
- the interests and goals of ethnic movements, and what kinds of strategies and ideologies they pursue;
- the reasons why some ethnic conflicts become violent while others are regulated within existing political and constitutional structures; and
- the mechanisms which can be developed to prevent, contain or resolve such conflicts.

This paper contains the principal findings of a larger study by Ralph Premdas on ethnic conflict and development in Fiji. It traces the historical origins of ethnic problems on the island, the key forces which have contributed to their intensification in recent years, the various attempts made to preserve balance and accommodation and the economic, political, social and psychological impacts of the crisis in ethnic relations since 1987. The key features of the ethnic equation are familiar from other bipolar societies. The indigenous Fijians and the immigrant Indians constitute the main ethnic groups each accounting for approximately 48 per cent of the population. The colonial policy reinforced the differences in language, religion and culture between the two communities through residential and educational segregation and distinctive economic and political roles for different communities. The Indians predominated in sugar cane cultivation, commerce, industry and the professions while the indigenous Fijians engaged in subsistence farming and occupied the majority of public sector jobs, including the armed forces. The colonial dispensation assured Fijians political paramountcy, land ownership and rule through indigenous institutions. In the process, it also shielded them from the modern economy and thus contributed to their subordinate economic status.

The onset of independence brought into the open some of the ethnic tensions which had been latent during the colonial era. These arose from the issues of political representation, access to land and to jobs in the public services and the modern sector. A series of compromises and accommodations among community leaders ensured a delicate balancing of ethnic interests for two decades. These comprised dilution of democratic principles to ensure continued control of the political system by the Fijians, leasehold security for Indian sugar cultivators and sharing of jobs in the public service. This balance was upset in the 1987 elections which resulted in the defeat of the Alliance Party controlled by the Fijian elite and the formation of the government by a coalition of the Fiji Labour Party and the Indian-based National Federation Party. The subsequent coup d'état led to a suppression of the civilian regime and the institution of an increasing range of discriminatory policies against Indians.

The costs of the breakdown in ethnic balance and accommodation have been serious. Politically, there has been a loss of régime legitimacy, destruction of democracy and violation of human rights. In the economic domain, unemployment and poverty have been intensified through decline in investment and tourism and through capital flight and brain drain. Growing realisation of these costs is contributing to renewed attempts to find enduring solutions to ethnic problems in Fiji.

The author of the paper, Ralph Premdas, teaches at the University of the West Indies and holds a research appointment at McGill University. The project on Ethnic Conflict and Development is co-ordinated by Rodolfo Stavenhagen, El Colegio de México.

October, 1993

Dharam Ghai
Director

Introduction: Development and Ethnicity

In the multi-ethnic states of the Third World, planned political change for development cannot succeed unless conceived through the prism of ethnicity. Developmental change cannot follow a simple linear path driven by neutral factors such as capital and technology without being mediated through social processes, especially the recognition of ethnic interests. The ethnic factor is a fundamental force in the Third World environment and must be incorporated into any development strategy that is adopted. Ethnic pluralism cannot be assumed out of existence; it cannot be reduced to an epi-phenomenon that will disappear when change transforms the environment. The ethnic factor is integral to the environment; it is at once both the subject and object of change. If it is accepted that the ethnic variable is and must be an integral part of the process of planned change, then one would expect to find it occupying a central role in the many strategies of development that have been designed and implemented in the Third World. Yet this is not the case. In the orthodox models of economic and political development from which strategies of change have been adopted for Third World transformation, the ethnic factor has generally been neglected.

The obstacles that have been identified have come to define the nature of the development task. In the economic sphere, they are lack of capital, entrepreneurial and organizational expertise, infrastructure etc.; in the political realm, they are problems of participation, power, mobilization, etc.; and in the social field, they focus on institutional structures, minimum standards of education, nutrition, maternity care, housing, etc. Different ideologies of development vary the salience and mixes of these factors in interpreting and facilitating change.

Regardless of whether they are founded on Marxist class analysis or capitalist laissez faire market claims, the various interpretations of social change tend to consign out of existence or consciousness the political-cultural claims of ethno-national groups, deeming these residual factors which would in due course be assimilated or eliminated in the process of developmental change. The evidence against this de-emphasis of the ethno-cultural factor by the different ideologies is devastating. From Lebanon in the Middle East to Guyana on the South American continent, from Northern Ireland to Azerbaijan in Europe to Quebec in North America, from the Sudan and South Africa to Sri Lanka and Malaysia, the assertion of the ethnic factor has made shambles of development objectives and social peace everywhere, on all continents, in both underdeveloped and industrialized societies. But particularly in the multi-ethnic states of the impoverished Third World, the ethnic resurgence, like an unrestrained monster, has devastated all those promising plans for change, built on sophisticated economic and other models. Where it has exploded, the "ethnic bomb" has diverted enormous amounts of scarce resources for security and stability. From a neglected and peripheral factor, the ethnic variable has now emerged as one of the paramount forces of Third World change.

The environment of cultural pluralism and ethnic diversity is now grudgingly but generally acknowledged as a critical variable that must be incorporated in designing new strategies for development. We know little about this factor, however, and only in a general way, not with the sort of sure-minded confidence that goes with the manner in which an established body of knowledge is handled. The reason for this ambivalence is clear. Systematic knowledge of

ethnicity in the operations of social structure and in particular with reference to development is desperately deficient and scholarship impoverished. The ethnicity domain is a frontier only now being systematically explored. Questions on the nature of this phenomenon are as plentiful as accepted answers are lacking. Many contemporary theorists and researchers are generating new insights into ethnic relations. There is urgent need to examine the relationship between ethnicity and development in all its manifold political, economic, and social dimensions. The task is daunting; on its outcome may rest the fruitfulness of many designs of development involving billions of dollars and the fates of millions of poor people.

This essay aims to offer some empirical evidence and to generate some theoretical insights into the behaviour of the ethnic factor in the developmental experience of one Third World country, Fiji. The effort is undertaken in the belief that observation of individual country experiences can provide important building blocks for the construction of a wider theory on the connection between ethnicity and development. The essay begins with a discourse on and a definition of ethnicity.

Analysts define ethnicity in different ways to suit individual research needs. The sense in which it is used here incorporates three components: first, collective consciousness; secondly, bases of affinity; and thirdly, behavioural effects. Above all, ethnicity refers to collective group consciousness, that is, a shared sense of identity with a larger community; it pertains to the perception that one shares a common identity with a particular group and, in turn, is so perceived by others. Ethnicity is akin to nationalism and for this reason, ethnic consciousness may be referred to as ethno-nationalism so as to point to the fact many states contain several sub-communities with a distinct sense of consciousness from other similar groups. The second component of ethnicity points to certain putative commonalities such as common language, religion, region, tradition, etc., or a multiple coincidence of several of these, which together can contribute to deep divisions in a state. Clifford Geertz referred to these factors as “primordial”:

“By primordial attachment is meant one that stems from the ‘givens’ or more precisely, as culture is inevitably involved in such matters, the assumed ‘givens’ of social existence: immediate contiguity and live connection mainly, but beyond them the givenness that stems from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language, or even a dialect of a language, and following particular social practices. These congruities of blood, speech, custom, and so on, are seen to have an ineffable, and at times, over-powering coerciveness in and of themselves. One is bound to one’s kinsman, one’s neighbour, one’s fellow believer, ipso facto as the result not merely of personal attraction, tactical necessity, common interest or incurred moral obligation but at least in great part by virtue of some unaccountable absolute import attributed to the very tie itself.”¹

The primordial factors, such as religion, race, language, custom, etc., may be regarded as

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