Chapter – 1

Theoretical Approaches to Study Political Assertion and Ascendancy to Power

1.0 Introduction

There is no unanimity among social scientists over the approach to study political assertion. Scholars working on the political assertion of an ethnic group from different theoretical perspectives use different approaches and attach different levels of importance to different elements in their research. However, in general, political assertion of any group mean, establishing a political supremacy of one group over others. To maintain the supremacy different methods are used. A number of attempts have been made to establish a relation between ethnicity and politics. But the debate still continues on the issue of the reasons for the emergence of ethnic solidarity and ethnic conflict.

Ethnicity has always been a major element in state-building as well as the break-up of states and even more in the contemporary global situation. Almost every nation has had to deal with the problem of how to manage different ethnic communities. The situation becomes more complex when it involves diaspora communities. Empirically and theoretically, the subject matter has become significant to the academician today more then ever before.

The main source of conflict, which takes the shape of ethnic conflict, is largely due to conflicting interests in the socio-economic, political and cultural spheres. The question that needs probing is, how are conflicting interests managed by ethnic groups within society?
Very often racial conflict occurs due to the combination of socio-economic, political and cultural interests. If one group perceives that the other group as hindering their interests, then they initiate conflict. It occurs when the socially or politically dominant group perceives that the other groups are economically progressing better and are likely to alter the power equation in future; then they take steps to safeguard themselves from the threats of the other groups. This is common in many countries, especially African continents and the developing countries. This conflict takes various forms in different countries. Sometimes it becomes as serious as ethnic cleansing (Bosnia), unfavorable immigration laws, dominance and exploitation in various forms. In this case the majority (dominant) groups fail to recognize the positive contribution of the immigrant settlers. In contrast to this, developed countries manage the conflicting interests in a very rational manner. They extract more benefit from the immigrant settlers and, at the same time, the latter are subjected to less harassment. In developed countries, legislation serves to safeguard the interests of both groups even though there is bias in favour of the majority.

The case of Mauritius is unique in understandign the assertion of one ethnic group in a multi-ethnic society. The people of Indian origin asserted in the political system through a democratic process. After that they moved towards democratic consolidation. All the ethnic groups developed a consciousness on important issues like economic development, functioning of coalition politics etc. Despite the

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fact that independence was won along ethnic lines, politics was guided on ethnic issues, the chance of ethnic conflict was lesser than other places. Here an attempt has been made to summarise the various approaches for ethnic theories on political assertion in a multi-ethnic society.

1.1 Study of Ethnicity Through Political Recognition of Ethnic Pluralism.
The relationship between the state and ethnicity often reflects contrasting viewpoints concerning the role of the state in creating or in dissolving an ethnic problem. Some scholars maintain that the political recognition of ethnic pluralism can create ethnic conflict, others such as John Boy Ejobowah argue that the constitutional recognition of ethnic groups aims at deepening democracy to challenge the political domination of majority groups and a threat to minority culture. He also discusses to what extent this kind of democratic structure expresses ethnic pluralism and, at the same time, avoid the divisiveness that goes with social particularism. Using the case of Nigeria he explains that group expressive arrangements have the prospect of generating social and institutional instability, but non-expressive arrangements promise intense conflict and are a more serious threat to the existence of the polity. Therefore, there is no fundamental tension between the quest of democratic inclusion and political stability. ²

1.2 Rational Choice Model of Ethnicity
Hechter adopts the rational choice theory to explain ethnic and racial relations. He rejects the earlier normative and structural theories, because both ignore individual

preferences. He defines how an individual within their environmental constraints would choose the most rational and effective way to achieve them.

Given this reason, individuals will perform public functions only when they receive a net benefit by doing so. As a result, both collective action and social order depend on the belief of most people that free riding and crime do not pay. The rational actor will commit crime to attain his or her goals, unless deterred by the fear of imprisonment (or some other punishment). Similarly, in large groups, where informal social controls lose their efficacy because individual networks rarely overlap, collective action is problematic because free riding is hard to detect. 3

In this regard, he believes that ethnic organisation can play a crucial role. This is so because of two reasons. First, they are the major sources of private reward and punishment that motivate the individual’s decisions to participate in collective actions. Second, because the individual benefit/cost calculation depends on his estimate of the probability of success of any collective action. Organisations can play a crucial role by controlling the information available to their members. When members have few alternative sources of information, organisations can easily convince them that the success of a collective action is a real possibility. On this basis the likelihood of ethnic collective action varies positively which organisational resources, monitoring capacity, solidarity, control over information, history of equitable distribution of collective benefits and adoption of non-violent

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tactics, while it varies negatively with organisational size and the capacity of the antagonist including the state, to punish prospective participants.  

But these provisions of selective incentives may not be sufficient to induce collective action, if we take into account the other two types of costs, namely, monitoring and allocation cost, in curtailing the deviance or free riding in any collective action.

This has led Hechter to look for causes other than environmental constraints exercised by ethnic organisations to explain collective actions. Here, he emphasises the role of individual preferences. He argues that under certain conditions individuals can be induced to maximise some collective, rather than individual utility schedule. In such a case people would want to act in the interest of their ethnic or racial group and would not even be tempted to take a free ride. Then he goes on to show the process of preference formation to show when such a situation could arise.

He argues that preferences are formed through both selection and learning mechanisms. While the selective mechanism obviously pushes the individual to choose the adaptive preferences, under learning mechanisms individuals form preferences through differentiated association. This is because differentiated association limits the feasible set of models or persons whose behaviour is available for observation. For this, and also because the privileged status that childhood experiences play during the rest of an individual's life, family plays a crucial role in the individual's preference formation.

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4 Ibid., p.272.
1.3 Ethnic Group Entitlement Approach to Study Political Assertion

The entitlement approach to study assertion is an approach which believes that the individuals self-esteem and collective self-esteem is achieved largely by social recognition. They argue that ethnic or group ties are based on language, religion, race and ethnicity, and territory proponents of this view claim that nations and ethnic communities are the natural unit of history and integral elements of human experience. Donald L. Horowitz in his book "Ethnic Groups in Conflict", discusses theory of entitlement, in which he maintains that everywhere, especially in developing countries, where the sphere of politics is unusually broad and its impact is powerful, collective social recognition is conferred by political affirmation. For this reason, struggles over relative group worth are transferred to the political system. Political affirmation confers something else that ethnic groups seek. That is ethnic identification with the polity. He argues that identification can be spread either exclusive or inclusive. Some groups claim that the country (or the region or the town) is, or ought to be, theirs and that the political system should reflect this fact by being constituted along essentially homogeneous lines. Others groups merely claim the right to be included on equal terms.5

According to this view the claim to inclusion is not dependent on the contest for group worth. It derives from the urge to be in harmony with one’s surroundings, to belong in a territory, to be comfortable. This inclusion and exclusion keeps changing with priorities in politics. If the presence of ethnic strangers provides an unflattering contrast with one’s own group, that would be a good enough reason to emphasise demands for exclusion of the strangers. Homogeneity would remove the offending comparison. The claims to group legitimacy provide alternative ways of

measuring worth. If a group that suffers by invidious comparison along the
dimension of achievement motivation, it may nonetheless have a special
connection with the land that furnishes an alternative basis for relative group
evaluation. Groups that do suffer from such comparision tend, therefore, to make
stronger claims to priority by virtue of legitimacy, so as to make up on one front
what they have lost on another. 6

Relative group worth and relative group legitimacy thus merge into a politics of
ethnic entitlement. Otherwise inexplicable characteristics of ethnic conflict—such
as the overwhelming concern of ethnic groups with the goal of political domination
and the high symbolic content of ethnic politics—can be explained in terms of the
politics of entitlement in both of its aspects.

The ethnic group desire for political power to occupy prevalent greater things. The
fear of ethnic domination and suppression is a motivating force for the acquisition
of power as an end. And power is also sought for confirmation of ethnic status.
Fundamental issues, such as citizenship, electoral system, designation of official
languages and religions, the rights of groups to a ‘special position’ in the polity,
rather than merely setting the framework for politics, become the recurring
subjects of politics. Conflicts over needs and interests are subordinated to conflicts
over group status and over the rules to govern conflict. 7

He further argued that the control of the state is a central theme of ethnic
conflict. The political conflict occurs in a poly-ethnic society in which the dominant
ethnic group wants the ethnic groups who are out of power should also be under

6 Ibid., pp.186-187.
7 Ibid., p.188.
the former. In most developing countries the timing of ethnic conflict usually depended on the approach of independence. He maintained that the transfer of power raised the cardinal question of who would rule. In this atmosphere of uncertainties, the greatest group anxiety was to avoid trading of old colonialism for a new one. And there remains a strong current of fear that an unranked system may be transformed into a ranked system, with clear superordinates and subordinates. The mutual insecurity results in incessant competition for power, which lead to political tension. The imminence of independence aroused "fear of ill treatment" along ethnic lines in Mauritius. The feared of overshadowed by more populous Hindus emerged among the then dominant Franco Mauritian population.  

He further argue that at the time of independence many backward ethnic group opposed independence due to the threat that they would be again colonised by the advanced group. But when these backward ethnic groups were in the majority they felt that independence would improve their position. New emerged group tried to occupy the position in the civil service. According to this view, the backward or advanced groups that were not in favour of early independence either collaborated with the colonialists or demanded formal guarantees. The struggle for domination and sharply opposed positions taken by ethnic groups on independence and constitutional arrangements reflect, not merely the anxiety-laden perceptions of backward groups, but also a more general phenomenon of distrust. Marvin.L. Rogers argue that if the ethnic groups have been mobilized into politics without being socialised to support a genuinely democratic, multi-ethnic political system, it

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8 Ibid., p.189.
would lead to frequent suspension of government. The attitudinal behavior of the dominant group determines the interethnic relation.9

He argues that in a multi-ethnic society, group claims are not necessarily equal. Some groups seek domination, not the mere avoidance of it. Some seek to exclude others from the polity altogether, and some seek merely to be included on equal terms. If all groups merely want inclusion, distrust and anxiety would still make ethnic conflict serious, but more tractable than it is. But claims to political inclusion and exclusion always create incompatibility between groups. And if all the groups are ready to share political power, generally the scope of ethnic conflict is very less. Political claims can therefore be scaled, from equality to priority to exclusivity. Equal political opportunities and exclusion limit the scope of ethnic conflict. He strengthens his argument with the case of those countries which deal with party politics and others with military politics. Again he maintains that ethnic claims respond to the political market, which in democratic countries is heavily structured by the electoral process and elsewhere by the balance of force. Mosca argues that ethnic exclusivism is quite common and it takes a number of forms. Homogeneity is the ultimate goal for the group which favours ethnic homogeneity of all groups, and if all assimilate, it imposes its own type of nationalism.10

The group entitlement theory also deals with group legitimacy. Here he maintains that ethnic group claims to priority or exclusion are supported by appeals to moral principles. The moral basis of ethnic claims lies in group legitimacy within a territory. Legitimacy is distributed unevenly among ethnic groups. There are several basis of group legitimacy some of them are like prior occupation, special

9 Ibid., p.192.
10 Ibid., p.195
mission, traditional rule, the right to succeed colonial power and colonial recognition of group legitimacy.\footnote{Ibid., pp.201-209.}

The other aspect which his theory deals with is the political consequences of differential legitimacy. In this section he suggest that pretensions to legitimacy have a number of consequences for the group asserting it as well as for the group responding to it. The structure of political claims and counterclaims is heavily conditioned by the strength and degree of acknowledgement of group legitimacy. In this section he further elaborate the political consequences.

After the establishment of institutions the politics of group entitlement changed to symbolic politics and ethnic status. Issues such as the status of languages, the names of places, the identity of people serving important positions and national anthems have played a significant role in influencing ethnic based politics. He has taken an example of Kenya where public attention was riveted on the issue of whether a Kikuyu or a Luo became principal of the University of Nairobi, for its outcome seemed to fore-shadow the general future of the non-Kikuyu. Demands for the symbolic recognition of status are not confined to multi-ethnic polities or to Asia and Africa. Insecure, declining, or rising groups frequently lay claim to a favourable distribution of prestige through the official invocation of symbols. The symbolic issue does not have an effect immediately, but usually connotes something about future treatment; who will be discriminated against and who will be preferred. He argues that all political systems must cope with such claims in a multi-ethnic society. R.Gusfield has articulated the objectives of symbolic conflict in terms of status politics. According to his view, politics holds a
commanding position for determining group status in post-colonial societies, for
two reasons. First, non-political institutions have been relatively weak in such
societies and cannot compete effectively with the state in the allocation of prestige.
Second, under colonial rule, attributes and emoluments of ethnic status become
matters of state policy.

According to this view the objective of symbolic demands is a public affirmation
of legitimacy where legitimacy is contested. The issues chosen for symbolic
emphasis depend on the issues that demarcate the contestants. Symbolism is
effective in ethnic conflict, because it provide space to ethnic claims in ideas and
associations that have acknowledge moral force beyond the particular conflict. The
pursuit of conflict through symbols thus obscures their segmental character by
linking them with universals and simultaneously avoids false prevailing local
ideology. In the context of symbolic politics, language, economic demand and civil
service became crucial indicator. In the multi-ethnic society, under the colonial
regime the language of administration was the language of the ruler, and the status
of language denotes the status of the group that speaks the language. All the groups
claim priority. Demanding that their language be given what they invariably call
‘its rightful place’ by which they mean exclusive official status. The status of the
language is a symbol of new found group dignity. Claims for official status for a
language are typically demands for an authoritative indication. Some people have a
legitimate claim to greater respect, importance, or worth in the society than have
other.\footnote{Gusfield, \textit{Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement},
(Urbana, Univ. of Illinois press, 1963), p.172} Language is therefore a potent symbolic issue because it accomplishes a
double linkage. It links political claims to ownership with psychological demands
for the affirmation of group worth, and it ties this aggregate matter of group status to outright careerism, thereby binding elite material interests to mass concerns.\textsuperscript{13}

The entitlement theorists claim that the assertion of the dominant ethnic group in the civil service is other important issue of symbolic ethnicism. During colonial times the civil service was an instrument for administration. Through the assertion in the civil service, groups feel satisfaction for their enhanced status. Since the groups rarely approach parity in both numbers and educational attainment, there is bound to be a less satisfied group. In the last, the theory predicts that ethno symbolic politics lead to ethnic conflicts if the different groups interest is not properly represented in the political system.

1.4 Assertion and Ascendancy of PIOs as an Ethnic Group in Mauritian Politics

A fair number of studies have been done dealing with political development in Mauritius and describe the ways in which the descendents of Indian immigrants in these societies "preserve their culture identity" and "reproduce for their political supremacy". Researchers have studies from different angles to understand the challenges and threats in a multi ethnic society.

The views of scholars regarding the ethnic base political development is not completely true in the case of Mauritius. According to the Instrumentalist view the emergence of ethnic-based parties is often conflict-prone. In the case of Mauritius, despite that the whole political development took place on ethnic and communal issues. The party were formed on ethnic lines to serve the purpose of particular ethnic groups.

The initial phase of political assertion of people of Indian origin takes

\textsuperscript{13} Donald, n.5,p.219
place on ethnic and communal basis but after emergence of common understanding on development issue the chances of ethnic conflict declined in the country.

The theoretical view of rational choice method and ethnic pluralism method does not justify the case of political assertion and ascendancy to political power in Mauritius. The ethnic pluralists are of the view that political recognition of ethnic pluralism developed a political unity among the ethnic groups. In the case of Mauritius despite the political representations of ethnic groups, all the ethnics groups maintained their own identity. The challenges for ethnic groups are endless. The rational choice method views that individual choice is the best rational method in their position. But it never discusses the background for taking the decision and what the challenges are in the new situation.

As the group entitlement view of ethnicity argues that ethnic or group ties are based on language, religion, race, ethnicity and territory, proponents of this view claim that nations and ethnic communities are the natural units of history and integral elements of human experience. These attachments or bonds among them are natural in the sense that they are prior to any kind of interaction. At the time of transfer of power all the group claim entitlement, but the assertion depends on the legitimacy of the group.

In the case of Mauritius, of all the methods suggested by Donald Horowitz colonial recognition of group legitimacy match completely. The recognition granted to people of Indian origin by the colonial power gets transformed into a political identity. They then demand supremacy. A common colonial past and customs play an important role in developing a sense of ethnic identity among the
ethnic groups. As suggested by this model, at the time of transfer of power minority group opposes the independence movement due to fear of dominance by majority group. The same condition applies in the case of Mauritius. At the time of independence there was a political void, 43 percent of the population had opposed and voted against independence. Non-PIOs groups demonstrated their grievances against the PIOs groups. The condition suggested by the horowitz that if the dominant group shares the political power on equitable and priority basis, the chances for the ethnic conflict is minimal. It is applicable in the case of Mauritius and it has also shown positive results.

From the times of independence the government was formed with the support of small parties. The traditions of coalition politics facilitate the participation of all ethnic groups in the country political system. The strong coalition partners supported the government for development strategy and remained resourceful pressure groups within the government. Moreover, the less powerful political groups also found allies in the government. The functioning of democratic institutions for the last thirty-five years also proved the equitable political participation of other ethnic groups. They also believed that following the social legitimacy of ethnic groups in society the chance of ethnic conflict was negligible. This was also true in the case of Mauritius. In Mauritius, the government provided protection to all the cultural and linguistic groups. All the ethnic groups participated in each others festivals and social gatherings. The model suggested that if the ethnic groups were immigrant, not indigenous, then the loyalty of ethnic groups toward their host country provided the
legitimacy. If their loyalty continued to their home countries then the discrimination between groups continued. If an immigrant group underwent a cultural revival with local context it helped them to attain legitimacy. In Mauritius, PIOs through their religious movements revised Indian culture in order to become full-fledged participants in their society and polity.

The nature of the political elite is another important issue in a multi-ethnic society. According to group entitlement theorists after the establishment of democratic institutions, the symbolic ethnic politics are initiated. The language, economy and representation used as instruments for assertion to continue their dominance and status also valid in the case of Mauritius. The political elite of people of Indian origin mobilized the masses on the basis of ethnic solidarity for ascendancy to political power. At the time of elections the ethnic issue was more important than any other time.

1.5 The Theoretical Issues Examined in the Perspective of PIOs Assertion

The present study examines the assertion of PIOs in the social, economic and political arena. All these three sectors are inter-linked. Any assertion in one area affects the other. For e.g., the PIOs political supremacy also helped them to strengthen their position in the civil services and other socio and economic areas.

The study substantiates the argument that legislative legitimacy, social legitimacy and political participation decrease the threat for ethnic conflict. Here an attempt would be made to understand the process of political assertion of people of Indian origin as an ethnic group and current positions of Indians and their relationship
with other ethnic groups. This study also examines the responses of other ethnic groups after the PIOs assertion.

Moreover, it has been commonly acknowledged that ethnic differences always have led to political instability. However, in the context of Mauritius, ethnic differences helped the PIOs to consolidate their political power.