

MINORITY IN NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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‘Minority’ is a compound of Latin word ‘minor’ and suffix ‘it’. ‘Minor’ means lesser, smaller, the smaller in number of the two aggregates that together constitute a whole. Thus, the derivative and original meaning of the word is given in statistical terms. And, merely numerical meaning, even though useful, does not serve social sciences purpose well and, hence, we must search for alternative sources for the meaning of ‘minority’.

Minority as a group characterized by a sense of separate identity and awareness of status apart from a usually larger group of which it forms or is held to form, a part. Collins Co build English Language Dictionary definitions, thus, delineate four different criteria characterizing minority: Statically, a minority group is smaller in number less than half of the larger group, Psychologically, the minority group nurtures a sense of separate identity and awareness of status apart from a usually larger group of which it is part; Socio-culturally,

a minority is a group of people of the same race, religion, etc. Who live in a place where most of the people around them are of a different race, religion, etc. That is to say, it is a racial, religious, or political group; Situation ally, minority is the condition or fact of being smaller, inferior or subordinate to the larger controlling group. The definitional, properties of minority are at once numerical, psycho-socio-cultural, and situational in delineation of the term.

It may be mentioned in passing that among those who do not study minority groups, the common tendency is to take the word 'minority' literally and simply. In its literal and simplistic view, the term 'minority' is used to say that a minority is smaller group of people who live in the midst of larger group. And at least, two defects make the simple definition useless. One, group are not "naturally" or inevitably differentiated. Customs either of the minority or the majority or usually both-must define them as differentiated as minority groups, which entails a set of attitudes and behaviours. Two, relative numbers in and out of the group have not been found to be definition ally important. Thus, it is necessary to counterpoise a 'minority' to a dominant group in terms of power, or to abandon the term 'minority' altogether and call it a 'subordinate' group. We therefore, abandon the literal and simplistic view of minority.

According to the new Encyclopedia Britannica, ‘minority’ is actually, ethnically, or racially distinct group living within a larger society.

As term is used by politicians and social scientists, a majority is necessarily subordinate to dominant group within a society. This sub-ordinancy, rather than numerical minority, is the chief defining characteristic of a minority group.

In their separation from the dominant forces of a society, members of a minority group usually are cut off both from a full involvement in the working of the society and form an equal share in the society’s rewards. A minority group is typically poorer and politically less powerful than the dominant group, although certain exceptions exist.

International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences has following to say about the meaning of the minority group:

“Contemporary sociologists generally define a minority as a group of people-differentiated from others in the same society by race, nationality, religion or languages – who both think of themselves as a differentiated group with negative connotations. Further they are relatively lacking in power and, hence, are subjected to certain exclusions, differentiations and other differential treatment. The important elements in this definition are a set of attitudes- those of group and those prejudices from without and a set of self – segregation from within the group of those of discrimination and exclusion from without.”

This, then, suggests that the encyclopedic elucidation of the word 'minority' is all encompassing. It is not confined merely to numerical aura. Rather, it is emphasized that minority is culturally, ethnically, racially, or linguistically distinct group in the midst of a larger society. A minority is necessarily subordinate to dominant group within a society and subordinancy rather than numerical minority is the principal defining characteristic of a minority group. A minority must be distinct social group and must have easily recognizable characteristics that mark it off from the rest of society. A minority has defined rules of membership and cultural behavior. The members of a minority group are defined full participation in the working of society and equal share in the society's rewards. A minority group is relatively poor, politically less powerful, and subordinate to dominant group of a society. The important element in the definition of minority is set of attitudes and set of behaviors.

Let us have a glance at international forums to locate the meaning of minority group. The treaties and declarations made under the auspices of the League of Nations provided protection for "racial, religious or linguistic minorities." But in practice, these words were found to be imperfectly descriptive of the group whose protection was intended. The Sub-commission on prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities was set up under the Human Rights Commission that drafted 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights' approved by the U.N. General Assembly in 1948. Specifying minorities, the United Nations

Sub-commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities states that included in minorities are: "only those non-dominant groups in a population which possess and wish to preserve stable ethnic, religious or linguistic traditions or characteristics markedly different from those of the rest of the population."¹

"Minority in international law is population group with a characteristic in four of its culture and sense of identity occupying a subordinate political status."²

The constitution of India uses the terms 'minority/minorities' in four of its Articles namely, Articles 29(1), 30, 350-A, and 350-B. But it neither defines the term 'minority' or 'minorities' nor delineates criteria for determining minority. In order to bring a case under Articles 29 and 30 of the constitution, a community has first to establish its character as linguistic, scriptural, cultural, or religious minority. Thus, there is no definite definition or criteria for determining minority in the Constitution.

"The word 'minority' is not defined in the Constitution, we must hold that any community-religious or linguistic-which is numerically less than 50 per cent of the population of the state is entitled to the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution.

To sum up: the 'minority' has not been defined as yet clearly even in law. The Courts have relied on statistical criterion of being less than 50 per cent of the entire state population. Another criterion is the religion and language.

J. A. Laponce defines a minority group with somewhat different emphasis:

“A minority is a group of people, who because of common racial, linguistic, religious, or National heritage which singles them out from politically ‘dominant group’ fear that they may either be prevented from integrating themselves into the national community or their choice or be obliged to do so at the expense of their identity.”³

In summary, then, sociologists have referred to Minority groups of distinctive national and cultural characteristics, emphasized subjective element of national and cultural characteristics, emphasized subjective element of national consciousness which might characterize minorities not distinguished from rest of the population by obvious features of language, dress, habits, or physique. Subordinancy of the minority to the dominant group of a society is most important feature of minority group. It is a distinct social group with specific rules of membership and distinct cultural behaviour that distinguish it from the majority. The minority is differentiated from others in the same society by race, nationality, religion, or language.

Wagley and Harris pointed out to five properties of the minority group.

- A Minority is a social group whose members experience discrimination, segregation, oppression, or persecution at the hands of another social group- the dominant group- as result of the power differential. Equally important, they are the source of dominant group's advantages, since the oppression of one people confers privilege and status of another.
- A minority is characterized by physical or cultural traits that distinguish it from the dominant group. By virtue of these traits, its members are lumped together and "placed" in less desirable positions in the social structure.
- A minority is a self conscious social group characterized by a consciousness of oneness. Its members possess a social and physiological affinity with others like themselves, providing a sense of people-hood. This consciousness of oneness is accentuated by the members' common suffering and burdens.
- Membership in a minority group is generally not voluntary. It is an ascribed position, since an individual is commonly born into the status. Thus a person does not usually choose to be black or white.

The members of the minority, by a choice or necessity, typically marry with their own group (endogamy). The dominant group strongly discourages its members from marrying members of the minority group, and usually those who do. The minority may encourage its members to marry among themselves to preserve their unique cultural heritage.

The Muslim Elite is unaware of the feeling of the Muslim masses. The Elite groups belonging to the minorities continue to persist with getting concessions, representations, jobs etc. No Political Party has any positive programme to solve the problems of the Minorities. They are always neglected by every government whom they have voted to come to power. No Muslim leader has the courage to speak and solve Problems of Muslims in the real sense.

A fresh perspective is needed for solving the real problems of the Minorities i.e. a comprehensive programme for the overall development of the minorities.

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