China's New Ethnic Unity Law

Mains: *GS II – International Issues*

Why in News?

On July 1, 2026, China brought into force the Law on Promoting Ethnic Unity and Progress, a landmark legislation aimed at strengthening what the Chinese government calls the "community of the Chinese nation" (Zhonghua Minzu).

What is the context of ethnicity in China?

- **Major ethic groups –** China officially recognises **56 ethnic groups**.
- **Han Chinese –** Over 90% of the population.
- **Ethnic minorities –** Around **125 million people (8.89%)** according to the 2020 Census.
- **Major minority groups** – They Include:
  - Uyghurs (~11 million)
  - Tibetans (~7 million)
  - Mongolians
  - Hui Muslims
  - Zhuang
- **Rights of minorities** – Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (1949), minority regions such as **Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Guangxi and Ningxia** have enjoyed limited constitutional autonomy.
- However, under **President Xi Jinping**, China's ethnic policy has shifted from multicultural accommodation towards building a **single national identity**.
- **Evolution of China's Ethnic Policy –** The new legislation is the culmination of reforms initiated after the **2014 Central Ethnic Work Conference**.
- **Major milestones include:**
  - **2014 –** Xi Jinping called for strengthening the "Chinese national community."
  - **2015 –** Xinjiang introduced ethnic unity regulations.
  - **2021 –** Inner Mongolia adopted similar legislation.
  - **2026 –** National law extends these policies across China.
- The emphasis has gradually shifted from **ethnic autonomy** to **national integration**.

What are the key provisions of the law?

- **Promotion of a Shared National Identity –** The law seeks to strengthen the "sense of community of the Chinese nation."
- Its objectives include, national unity, ethnic integration, national rejuvenation, social

stability, strengthening loyalty to the communist part.

- **Mandatory Mandarin Education –** Article 15 mandates, mandarin instruction before kindergarten.
- Mandarin-medium education throughout compulsory schooling.
- The objective is to establish mandarin as the common national language across all ethnic communities.
- **Sinicisation of Religion –** article 46 requires, religious organisations, places of worship, religious schools, to promote the **sinicisation of religion**.

Sinicisation of religion means *religious practices must conform to, Chinese laws, Socialist values and Communist Party leadership*

This applies to, Islam, Tibetan Buddhism, Christianity and Other recognised religions.

- **Action Against Separatism –** The law prohibits activities that, undermine national unity, promote ethnic division and encourage separatism.
- These provisions contain broad language, giving authorities considerable discretion in interpretation.
- **Extraterritorial Jurisdiction –** Article 63 extends legal responsibility to, foreign organisations, and overseas individuals who allegedly support activities that undermine china's national unity.
- **Objectives of the Chinese Government –** china argues the law is intended to, strengthen national cohesion, prevent separatism and extremism.
- Promote economic integration, reduce ethnic tensions, and build a unified national identity.
- Support the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."
- According to beijing, ethnic unity is essential for long-term stability and development.

What are the major concerns raised?

- **Threat to Cultural Identity –** Critics argue the law encourages cultural homogenisation by promoting, mandarin over minority languages, Han cultural norms, and uniform national identity.
- This may weaken traditional cultures and languages.
- **Religious Freedom –** The requirement to "Sinicise" religion may increase state control over, religious teachings, clergy appointments, places of worship and religious practices.
- Human rights organisations argue this restricts freedom of religion.
- **Contradiction with China's Constitution –** china's constitution guarantees, equality of ethnic groups, freedom to use and develop minority languages and regional ethnic autonomy.
- Similarly, the **Law on Regional Ethnic Autonomy** provides limited self-governance to minority regions.
- Critics argue that the new law effectively narrows these protections by prioritising national integration over ethnic autonomy.

- **Broad and Vague Provisions –** Terms such as, **"national unity", "national division", "separatism",** are not clearly defined.
- This may allow authorities to classify, peaceful protests, cultural activism, language preservation efforts, and religious activities,as threats to national unity.
- **Human Rights Concerns –** International organisations have expressed concern that the law could legitimise existing policies in, Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia.
- Human rights groups have documented allegations of, arbitrary detention, restrictions on religious practices, limits on cultural expression and surveillance.
- China rejects these allegations, maintaining that its policies are aimed at combating terrorism, extremism and separatism while promoting development.
- **International Reactions –** The **UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)** has expressed concern that the law could, restrict minority rights, undermine linguistic diversity, limit religious freedom and encourage forced assimilation.
- Several Western governments and international human rights organisations have similarly questioned the compatibility of the law with international human rights standards.
- China maintains that ethnic affairs are an internal matter and rejects external criticism.
- **Implications for India –** The legislation has relevance for India because:
- It affects Tibetans and Uyghurs, issues with geopolitical significance.
- Stability in Xinjiang has implications for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), an area claimed by India.
- Developments in Tibet have implications for India's border security and the Tibetan refugee community.
- The law reflects China's increasing emphasis on internal security and national integration under Xi Jinping.

What lies ahead?

- China's Law on Promoting Ethnic Unity and Progress represents a significant shift in the country's governance of ethnic affairs by legally embedding policies that prioritise a common national identity.
- While the Chinese government views the law as essential for national unity, social stability and development, critics argue that it risks eroding cultural diversity, linguistic rights and religious freedoms through assimilationist policies.
- The law illustrates the broader tension between state-led nation-building and the protection of minority identities, a debate that continues to attract international attention and has important implications for regional stability and global human rights discourse.

Reference

The Hindu| China’s New Ethnic Law

BBC| Ethnic Law of China

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