UNIT 1  IDENTITY MEANINGS AND SIGNIFICANCE

Structure

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you will be able to:

- describe the various meanings of identity;
- classify factors leading to the formation of identity;
- understand Freud, a social psychologist;
- discuss the significance of identity; and
- identify the implication of studies of diasporas in identity formation.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

When we ask for a person’s identity we ask to establish the person’s name and what position he occupies in the community. Personal identity of an individual means much more, it is a sense of continuous existence in the socio-cultural framework of society and also a coherent memory of it. Psycho-social identity is both subjective and objective; it implies both the individual and the social.

Identity implies continuity and sameness in situations, and it is also observable and recognized by others. It is a conscious process. Freud, a very important psychologist, formulated the social foundations of identity when he spoke of an inner identity. For example, he said that the tradition of Jewry gave the capacity to the people to live and think in isolation. The psycho-social identity thus develops the traditional values of particular communities of people. This effectiveness of this process depends on the integration of the individual ego into the group.
There is a great deal of critical theory about the formation of society and questions about cultural identity. In recent years identity and identification is a whole composite subject that is dependent on place, gender, race, history, nationality, sexual orientation, religious beliefs and ethnicity. Some critics of social identity emphasize on commonalities and features that are shared between individuals and posit that cosmopolitanism or shared social identity are also being equally important. This theory does have merit; one can see it in the Greco-Roman identity of Europe. Europe is said to have strong common links with the Greco-Roman culture. This is also demonstrated in the ancient Indian culture which had a great deal of cultural contact with ancient Egypt and China.

However, one has to keep in mind the uniqueness that is maintained by the individuals that leads to a distinct and succinct identity formation. One cannot rely totally on shared features and commonalities alone while explaining tradition and culture.

There are several meanings to the concept of identity. We shall now study them in greater detail. The concepts are as follows:

1) Self-concept and individuality
2) National identity
3) Social identity
4) Gender identity

1.2.1 Self-concept and individuality

The concept or the assessment of oneself as being an individual trait can be described as having a ‘self individuality’. This can be described as the attitude, behaviour or the habits and beliefs of an individual that are determined by social, cultural, physical and physiological conditions. This is highly self-reflexive (meaning an inward process) and is often developed when one is reflective and insightful. Self-concept and individuality predetermines all other subjects related to it. Gender identity, social identity and national identity all stem from the generic notions of selfhood. The concept of the individual is also socially constructed within a particular society; many societies have different concepts of self and other.

Sigmund Freud studied the individual personality and his theories have had a deep impact on understanding the relation of an individual with his society. We need to discuss in this in detail. According to Freud the human personality is made up of three major systems the id, ego and superego. Human behaviour is motivated through the interaction of these three systems. The id is fundamental to these three systems and contains all the psychological instincts that are present at birth. This is the “true physic reality” as it represents the inner world of a human being.

The id commands two main processes, the reflex action and the primary processes. Reflex actions are actions such as sneezing and blinking that reduce biological tension and the primary process reduces tension by creating a mental picture, for
example a hungry person will imagine food and reduce his tension. This also can be called ‘wish fulfillment’.

The ego is fulfilled when an individual deals with the objective world of reality. For example, the hungry person has to seek and find food before the tension of hunger is eliminated. This means the individual, therefore has to learn how to differentiate between the image of food and the actual perception of food. Hence the ego distinguishes between things of the mind and things in the external world. The ego thus manifests itself by the means of the secondary process to obey the reality principle. The aim of the reality principle in this case is finding food. The secondary process is realistic thinking and the plan that one individual undertakes to release tension created by unfulfilled needs and desires.

The ego leads to human action. The individual selects the features in his environment and decides how his instincts will be satisfied and in what manner. It must be kept in mind that the ego is consciously separated from the id but yet carries forward the primal aims of the id. It is never completely independent of it.

The last system of personality is the superego. This is the internal representation of the traditional values and ideals of society which are imposed on an individual by the systems of rewards and punishments. This is an ideal condition and is not real but rather represents the moral aim of life. The main concern of the individual is to decide whether something is right or wrong and act in accordance with the moral standards of society. For example, a person is hungry but he will not steal food to satisfy his hunger since he is acting on the basis of the moral principle of society. His superego will thus prevent him from stealing food.

The superego is imposed on the child by parents in response to the rewards and punishments meted out by them. In order to obtain the rewards and avoid the punishments the child learns how to guide his behaviour along the lines laid down by his parents. The superego often opposes both the id and the ego and it tries to block the instinctual gratification.

Freud also examined the dynamics of personality. According to him all humans are born with instincts that can be called a wish. The wish and the instincts of human beings exercise control over human conduct and behaviour and increase human sensitivity and understanding. The individuals also are further stimulated through the response that they receive in the outer world. Instincts have four main features: a source, an aim, an object and an impetus. Freud distinguished between two types of instincts that he called ‘life instincts’. The life instincts are those that are needed for the purpose of individual survival. Hunger, thirst and sex falls under this category. Death instincts are the destructive death wishes of an individual. Aggression is a manifestation of death instinct. For example, a person fighting is a manifestation of a death instinct.

The development of human personality, according to Freud, takes place in the early years of infancy that lays the basic character structure of an individual. Personality develops in response to tensions, including threats and conflicts. Through identification the humans learn to resolve his frustrations. In identification an individual takes over the features of another person and makes it a part of his own personality. For example, the child identifies with his parents as they appear omnipotent and supreme to him in his early years of infancy.
We also need to understand the concept of identity crisis while examining selfhood. Often we see life process such as amalgamation, cooperation, social solidarity reveal themselves in phases of non-functionality. Sometimes psychological factors lead to severe disturbances in the sense of identity such as alienation, depersonalization and confusion.

Identity confusion is often recognized by neurotic disturbances that could result from traumatic events such as war and migration. Often we can see mental disturbances in children and adolescences that are accompanied by social and maturational changes that occur in an individual. The identity crisis can also be recognized in very often perverted, bizarre and delinquent behaviour. Often an identity crisis is solved through therapy and correctional means.

The identity formation of an individual takes place at birth. From his very stages of infancy the child learns from his socio-cultural environment. He responds to his immediate community and often relates to ideal prototypes. Self-identity is also related to history and historical processes. This leads to man becoming conscious of it. Man has also been divided into groups and subgroups, each coming up with their own notions of self. Identification also changes with new technological processes and shifting political and cultural systems. Changing roles needs to be redefined and also re-assimilated that are conditioned by new consciousnesses that are created as a result of technological and cultural advancements. For example, globalization has created a new consciousness and varied perceptions in humans.

Identities of self are also strongly determined by religion. Through religion man hopes to attain happiness and some kind of immortality. A notion of evil and good and striving for omnipotent reality leads to man striving for a condition that is beyond the daily circumstances. Self-identity is closely linked to nation and nationalism which we will discuss in the next section.

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<td>1) What forms the self-identity of an individual?</td>
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1.2.2 National identity

National identity is highly influenced by the concept of self-determination. According to Wikipedia, “self determination is a principle, often seen as a moral and legal right, that all peoples have the right [to] freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.” In India, national identity and consciousness arose in response to 18th and 19th century colonialism. India’s freedom struggle and the everlasting efforts of self-determination of both Gandhi and Nehru cannot be underestimated. It was this principle of self-rule that led to our freedom from the British and gave us a strong national identity.

The concept of self determination and national identity is closely linked up to freedom of religion, freedom of speech and freedom of political power. National identity is largely collective and not subject to an individual alone. Self-determination is also a communal right. Woodrow Wilson first applied self-determination as a concept in January 1918. In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations states that everyone has the right to a nationality and that no one should be arbitrarily deprived of a nationality or denied the right to change nationality. Self-determination is often invoked in national liberation struggles, secession of territories, and constitutional disputes about how this right can be expressed to the satisfaction of opposing interest groups.

Of all the psychological processes directly relevant to political behaviour none is more pervasive than that of identification. This can be seen in the individual’s identification with a nation, an ideological movement, a political party, a social class, a racial or ethnic group, a labour group or a religious association. Marx analyzed this as ‘class consciousness’ wherein different social and economic classes maintain individual interests and interact and communicate with each other.

As discussed earlier, the term identification in the modern sense of the term was developed by Freud. He termed this as being the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person. The child may identify with his father. After the infancy this situation to identify carries into varying situations. Identification can be plural, for example a soldier can take his commander to be the ideal one and also identify with the rest of the soldiers and have strong religious affinities.

Man is a social animal and he has the affiliates and emotional ties which get manifest in strong national identities. This can be seen in the strong propagandas followed by the Nazis or organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan in America. Political party identification also has developed strongly in America and in that country any person who thinks, considers or regards himself to be a republican can be termed as being one. It is interesting to note that in America children start identifying themselves as Republicans or Democrats by the age of seven or eight. This is in great contrast to India where identifications to political parties are more limited.

National identity also leads to the development of nationalism which is in essence a political doctrine that divides the humanity into separate and distinctive nations. In this philosophy each nation is a separate political unit. Hence this invokes the
belief that the groups of people have a shared culture, language and sometimes religion. Nationalism was studied in relation to cultures in the 1980s as a part of the post colonization processes that occurred especially in India and African countries.

According to Ernest Gellner, in *Nations and Nationalism*, there is a close link to nationalism and modernity. He says that industrial societies are based on cultural homogeneity that allows economic growth. Hence the state takes over this economic production and nationalism develops as a correlate to this process. Chatterjee has also examined the contradictions of anti-colonial and postcolonial nationalisms in India. Nationalism also gets developed due to advances made in mass media, consumption, art and folklore.

In India we can see that self-determination lead to the formation of states like Jharkhand, Uttaranchal and Chattisgarh.

Modern science and technology also has lead to the formation of national identity and cultural recognition. We must also take into account the process of acculturation and how it modifies national identity. Acculturation can be termed as the cultural modification of groups and individuals material culture, behaviours, beliefs and values caused by borrowing from or adapting to other cultures. The next section will deal with the social identity.

### 1.2.3 Social identity

Society is a universal condition of human life. As fellow human beings we totally depend on fellow creatures and the conditions of human life cannot be met on its own. As members of a society we are also bound by certain rules and regulations which also have some shared culture and ideology. Individuality in society is on the basis of authority, conflict resolution, cooperation, exploitation and modes of exchange.

Society is used to encompass a large network of social relationships and social identity is based on the interaction of the individual with others. The society deals with the reconstruction of religious, familial, educational and political institutions and the individual identity is constructed amongst these institutions.

Socialization is a process through which the people especially children are made to take on the ideas and behaviours appropriate to life in a particular society. Society thus consists of a collective life and social identity is said to precede and encompass all individuals and is based on a group consciousness. Social identity is based on learning from the behaviours of adults in a society.

The child in any society comes to understand its position in according to its birth, age and sex. Through the exchanges of food, talk and physical contact the child has an understanding of self and others. Herbert Spencer sees society as the end product of the interactive association of individuals. The society is based on collective consciousness that is higher and external to the individual one.
Social identity therefore refers to some commonalities that are associated with groups. The social and cultural world is composed of segments in which membership is defined by others and shared. The individual learns to adjust his behaviour so that he can adjust his attitude so that he can meet the expectations of the other. All individual behaviours depend on a stimulus (S) impinging on the organism (O) and produce a response (R). A person action is based upon the changing environment. The individual will also want to interact and transact with objects that will have a positive value for him and will avoid lower organisms. This all contributes to his identity.

The social identity of a man is moulded by the interaction that he keeps with his fellow social beings. We form an impression of a person from is interaction with us or with others and our impressions in turn condition our interaction with him. Other persons can thus act as sources of information or as direct mediators of reward. For example, the child’s parents provide him with food, warmth and shelter and also certain knowledge he requires to engage in the business of living within his social milieu.

Social identities are formed around bio/social values like race, sex and age. They are also organized around specific socio-cultural values like kinship groups, national and ethnic groups based on community, language, culture or history. There are also some multi-bonded groups such as families, tribes, nations and social classes.

Social identity is also altered or changed due to social mobility. This is the movement of individuals, families and groups from one social position to another. An individual’s life chances of occupation, prestige, income etc is closely linked to the social circumstances. Social mobility is closely linked to achievement. This often varies during the life span of an individual. This can be seen when we make comparisons in the social position of the father and son at several time points during their careers. Factors that determine social mobility is father’s occupational status, educational ability and intelligence.

Social identity is often dependent on categorization or the categories that we put people into. We often determine people on the basis of their religion, ethnicity, gender or race. We thus associate people strongly in groups and subgroups. This entails some kind of comparison being made on the basis of social, physiological, physiological self. Social identity thus determines how groups behave, how their attitudes are formed and how their desires are met. This was propounded by the theories of Tajfel. Social identity is thus group behaviour and Tajfel first sought to differentiate between those elements of self-identity derived from individual personality traits and interpersonal relationships (personal identity) and those elements derived from belonging to a particular group (social identity).

According to Giddens, “Social identities... are associated with normative rights, obligations and sanctions which, within specific collectivities, form roles. The use of standardized markers, especially to do with the bodily attributes of age and gender, is fundamental in all societies, notwithstanding large cross-cultural variations which can be noted.”
Check Your Progress 2

Notes: 1) Your answers should be about 30 words each;
2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at
the end of the Unit.

2) What do you mean by society?

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1.2.4 Gender identity

The identification of any person as male or female is called gender identity. Gender is not biologically determined but rather sociologically and psychologically determined. Gender identity is conditioned environmentally. Biologically determinants are not therefore the ground rule. We also have multiple gender identities as in the case of Native Americans or the Indians as in the case of the Hijras.

Gender is an identification of a person as a male or female according to culture specific criteria. In everyday speech we see that the terms sex and gender tend to be to be employed interchangeably to give indication to the total functional and behavioural differences that occur between males and females. Social scientists however greatly differentiate between the two phenomenons. Sex refers to the biological and functional features that are manifest due to genetics (two X chromosomes in females and one X and Y in males.

Gender carries along with its interpretations a large body of behaviours, roles and expectations that are considered as being “appropriate or correct” only for members of one biological sex. Men and women are considered to be different. The roles are specified not only in sexual activity but also in work, family, religion, government, recreation and performance.

There are probably as many shades and complexities of sexual identity and gender identity as there are human beings, and there are an equal number of ways of working those gender identities out in the intricacies of daily life. Societies, however, tend to assign some classes of social roles to “male” individuals, and some classes of social roles to “female” individuals (as society perceives their sexes). In some societies, there are other classes of social roles for, e.g., surgically neutered physiological male, hijra, for example.

It has been seen that people with masculine gender identities will manifest external representation of their gender identities by adopting gender roles that are
appropriate to men, and, similarly, that people with feminine gender identities will adopt gender roles that are appropriate to women.

Gender gets represented in action and often gets translated in cultural symbols. In society we see that the males often are given a higher prestige value and there usually exists two different sets of values for men and women. The men are always linked to high public roles such as the chief or the Brahman while female prestige is often defined in relation to men and in roles such as wife, sister and mother. Ortner has studied the interplay between gender, kinship and social status and contends that hierarchy places the males over the females. She also observes that in marriage the husband occupies a chief like status in relation to his wife.

Women are always taken to be the producers, passive, outside the privileged domain as mere cultural objects. They are never seen as the agents of cultural change. Although women are always dependent as wives or sisters they too have attained some measure of economic, political and social freedom. This study also further informs us that an individual’s attractions to persons of different sex are also influenced by strong cultural attitudes.

Certain behaviours are also taken to be gender specific as we see that aggression is taken to be a male attribute while the willingness to fight fiercely usually to protect the young rather than to acquire territory is seen to be an essential female trait. A gender perspective has also shaped our understanding of culture and groups that are defined by gender or sexual orientation have their own social, aesthetic and forms of traditional communication.

Identity pervades several meanings and is controlled by the specificities of culture, religion, race, nation or sex. The next section will discuss the significance of identity.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF IDENTITY

Identity also creates a new dimension in politics. Identity politics here means the awareness and the realization of ones own identity. In this human rights are recognized and it seeks to codify social groups by political standing, language and class. In this the contribution of the studies in diaspora are very important and pertinent.

1.3.1 Case study: diaspora

Diaspora is clearly based on the lines of geography, national identity and belonging. Etymologically this word is derived from the Greek word diasperien which means dia “across” and sperien “to sow or scatter seeds.” This can be seen as naming of the ‘other’ or the displaced communities of people who have been dislocated from their native homeland through the movements of migration, immigration or exile. Diaspora suggests a dislocation from the nation states, territories or countries. This was originally used to describe the plight of the Jews living outside of Palestine.

Another historical reference to the diasporas has been in reference to the Black African diaspora beginning in the 16th century and dispersing them into the new world. These early historical references show that the diaspora was not voluntary.
The movement of people across the globe resulted in conquests, genocides and the trade of slaves along with essential commodities such as sugar and spice.

Diaspora in this world speaks of diverse groups of displaced people from Kuala Lumpur to Sydney and Harare to Toronto. Diaspora studies have been employed all across disciplines such as literature, sociology, anthropology, film studies, queer theory, area studies and ethnic studies. Diaspora studies are within the historical and cultural specificity of nations. They question the rigidities of identity—religious, ethnic, gender or national. This suggests new points of becoming or self consciousness or identity.

The term Diaspora has been increasingly used by anthropologists, literary theorists and cultural critics to describe the mass migrations and displacements of the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in reference to the independence movements in formerly colonized areas, waves of refugees fleeing war torn states and fluxes in economic migration in the post World War II era.

The recent theorizations of diaspora seek to represent the lived experiences with all their ambivalences, contradictions and migrations of the people whose lives have unfolded across the globe. These subjects are marked by hybridity and heterogeneity—cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and national. According to Hall, Diaspora “is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity which lives in and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity.” (Theorizing Diaspora, 5)

Diaspora helps us to re-examine 1) national identity and nationalism, and, 2) the homogenizing processes of globalization. The formation to see the nation as an ideal state form has undergone significant transformations. The national identity occurs within many set frames such as judicial, political, civic, economic and literary. Diaspora may be defined as being transnational and it essentially entails the flow of people, goods, ideas and capital across national territories. Therefore it redefines national identity and alters the meanings of identification, economic organization and political constitution.

When diaspora addresses the migrations and displacement of subjects it also includes the movement of information and traffic in goods, products and capital across geopolitical terrain through multinational corporations. Hence, diaspora studies offer an alternative paradigm for national, multinational, transnational and post-national identification.

In the context of late modernity and capitalism we see that capital has gone global. Diaspora has to be studied in the context of globalization and global capitalism. We must study diaspora in the context of multinational corporations, export industry and manufacturing jobs, economic migrations and the division of the countries into the first world and third world. Diaspora is frequently marked by flows that are trans-humans or trans-migrant. This we can see in the case of Indian doctors settling in the United States for better economic opportunities.

Hybridity does not mean assimilation but the history of survival within relationships of unequal power and domination. Diaspora understands the multiplicity in which we see that subjects are located within social relations which are determined by contradictions in capitalism, patriarchy and race relations. Hence heterogeneity, hybridity and multiplicity are concepts that assist
us in critically understanding the material, social and cultural conditions of Diaspora such as Indians in the United States.

Diaspora is deeply connected to the cultural identity. The notion of a cultural identity is based in the collective sense in which the people have a shared history or an ancestry that is common. Hence the diaspora has some kind of collective imaginings of nation and questions the true beings of the community. Hence it produces rootless people questioning their base of cultural identity and growth. The histories of a nation hence have some validity that is constructed through imaginings, memory, fantasies, narratives and myths.

Check Your Progress

Notes: 1) Your answers should be about 30 words each;
2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit.
3) Define Diaspora.

Let us now examine a case study about the Diaspora.

1.3.2 Hindus at Trinidad and their Bhojpuri songs

The cultures of West Indies have always been the object of intensive study since the World War II by social scientists who have studied their culture as a part of their research. The diverse music of these islands has always attracted much attention. The West Indies is a crescent-shaped archipelago stretching from near Florida to the Venezuelan coast and almost 11 million people inhabit the fifty distinct geographical units including Trinidad and Tobago.

Caribbean culture is diverse and is reflected in many racial and linguistics groups that have settled there such as the African, Asian and European. Several languages are spoken there such as Creole in Aruba, English Creole in Surinam and Bhojpuri in Trinidad. Many ships carried the newly recruited East Indians as indentured labourers bound to work on the sugar plantations of the New world. Many stories of the Saat samundar paar are told in Trinidad about the coming of thousands on ships. These accounts are also found in the Bhojpuri songs.

Many of the Indians, the so-called “coolies” began to settle in the islands and their new East Indian community just began to grow and develop. As the years passed, most of these coolies stayed in Trinidad joining the established East Indian community. Several festivals such as Diwali and the Muslim festival of Hosay are celebrated with great pomp and song and music. These Hindu and
Muslim festivals have been incorporated in the national calendar from the 1960s. The sectarian natures of these festivals have been broken down in such a manner that all people can join in for fun. Many of these songs have words in Hindi, Sanskrit, Bhojpuri and occasionally in Bengali. Many wedding songs from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are also sung in Trinidad.

1.4 LET US SUM UP

Identity and identification is a whole compound theme that is dependent on place, gender, race, history, nationality, sexual orientation, religious beliefs and ethnicity. It manifests in various situations and is dependent on the socio-cultural environment. It is highly dynamic and can be evolved over a period of time. It can also be a complex phenomenon as it is dependent on a large number of internal as well as external factors. It undergoes several meanings and transformation. The significance of identity can be reflected in Diaspora studies that give new alterations to sense of nationhood and nationalism.

1.5 ACTIVITIES

1) What are the main psychological themes that one can recognize in our myths? Explain them on the basis of the Mahabharata or any other Mythological tale that you are familiar with.

2) Explain the local history of your region that has contributed to India’s national identity.

3) A woman is a mother, daughter, wife or sister first—how much do you agree with this statement?

4) Do you have any relative who has immigrated abroad, or has any one that is known to you settled overseas? Explain the story of his migration.

1.6 READING LIST


1.7 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

1) Self-identity is formed by socio-cultural conditions. It is also determined biologically and is conditioned by national and religious motivations.
2) Society is used to encompass a large network of social relationships and social identity is based on the interaction of the individual with others. The society deals with the reconstruction of religious, familial, educational and political institutions and the individual identity is constructed amongst these institutions.

3) The term diaspora has been increasingly used by anthropologists, literary theorists and cultural critics to describe the mass migrations and displacements of the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in reference to the independence movements in formerly colonized areas, waves of refugees fleeing war torn states and fluxes in economic migration in the post World War II era.