UNIT 3  IDENTITY: FORMATION AND TRANSFORMATION

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you will be able to:

- understand that identities are dynamic in nature;
- explain how this dynamism is the result of those very processes that constitute an identity; and
- understand how different theories have attempted to analyse and theorise the processes that underlie this dynamism in identity formation.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, we will discuss some of the theories that have tried to explain how identities are formed and how they change. It is a well known historical fact that even as identity provides an individual with a sense of belonging and stability, yet at the same time identities change over a period of time. In a sense this dynamism is inherent in the very processes of constitution of identity. In course 2, block 2, unit 2 above, while discussing the various theories of identity it has been obliquely pointed out that construction of identity links an individual or a subject to a time and a community that extends beyond his period of existence and person. Thus, every identity has a temporal and a societal matrix. Both these matrices impart an inherent dynamism to identity.

Let us take the temporal matrix first. It had been indicated in course 2, block 2, unit 2 above that every identity has a sense of past. It seeks to explain how a community located at say point b in contemporary times reached there from say point a located in near or distant past. This acknowledgement of the sense of time in the very constitution of identity imparts a possibility of dynamism in identity, where by identity could display the traits of both being tenacious and unchanging and also volatile and capable of very rapid change.
Same possibility of continuity and change is also imparted by the societal matrix of identity. It is stated that community links an individual or a subject to a community, yet the boundaries of this community is not permanently sealed. On the contrary most theoreticians accept that the boundaries of societies may be not only relative but also “permeable” in the sense that people may permanently cross into another society (i.e. another ethnic group), and finally, that the members of an ethnic group need not share all the characteristics deemed as defining of the group (a polythetic “family resemblance” is sufficient). Identity, therefore, creates problems of both adhesion and dissent, of belonging and repudiation or innovation.

Evidently, then both the temporal and societal matrix of identity allow for dynamism in the very process of their constitution. In the course 2, block 2, unit 2, above we had discussed at length the various theories of identity. However, in that Unit main emphasis was on the analysis forwarded by these theories on the constitution of identities. In this Unit we will focus primarily on how various theories take account of transformation of identity. We will deal briefly with some of the important theoretical schools such as, the evolutionist, the diffusionist, the primordialist, the modernists/constructionist and finally the Marxist.

3.2 EVOLUTIONIST THEORY

Let us then begin with the evolutionist theory. This school of thought seeks to understand how human societies progress through various evolutionary stage, for instance from a ‘lower’ to a ‘higher’ stage. However, unlike the other theories of transformation this school of thought borrows most excessively from sciences especially biology. Adherents of this theory advocate that societies dispersed the world over exhibit the process of evolution from ‘savagery’ to ‘civilization’. They seek to answer the question that why so many independent projects of evolution follow a remarkably similar path of evolution i.e. from savagery to civilization? They derive the answer to this question from biology and argue that this striking similarity in patterns of evolution is based on the fact that human beings the world over share the same psychic structure.

One of the most famous adherents of this school of thought was E. B. Tylor. E.B. Tylor was a cultural evolutionist who believed that diffusion was involved in the process of humankind’s cultural evolution from savagery to civilization. He promoted the idea that culture probably originated independently more than once, owing to the psychic similarity of man the world over, but that actual historical development involved numerous instances of cultural diffusion, or inheritance from a common tradition. He traced diffused traits side by side with a deep conviction that there had been a general uniformity in evolutionary stages.

Formulated thus the school of thought imposes a very rigid and monist pattern of evolution for human societies, cultures and identities. In the sense that since all human beings share the same psychic structure they are destined to follow the same stages of evolution till they complete the developmental process from savagery to civilization. In other words it imposes teleology of development on societal evolution, where every society is destined to develop from savagery to civilization. Consequently, as per the tenets of this theory we can take account of only instances of development of human society, culture and identity. Unfortunately, human societies, cultures and identity do not follow such a
unidirectional pattern of change and transformation. There is a plethora of historical evidence where human societies, cultures, etc. do not progress but decline. This theory is incapable of explaining these processes of stagnation or decline.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: 1) Your answer should be about 400 words;

2) You may check your answer with the possible answer given at the end of the Unit.

1) What are the main tenets of evolutionist theory?

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3.3 DIFFUSSIONIST THEORY

Let us now focus on the diffusionist theory. Diffusionist theory is distinct from the evolutionist theory in very important respects, two of which are especially significant. First, in understanding society and societal transformations they do not emphasise on biological or genetic traits but instead they emphasise on cultural traits. Hence, while analysing transformation of societies, cultures and identities the emphasis of this line of research is to understand and explain how dominant cultural forms are “imposed, invented, reworked, and transformed.” The second important difference with the evolutionists is that unlike them the diffusionists do not believe that change occurs primarily due to the independent origination of culture probably more than once. Instead they forward social structural explanations, which made the process of diffusion more feasible cause of transformation than the process of innovation. They understand transformation of cultural traits in terms of two historical processes, diffusion and modification.

In course 2, block 2, unit 2, we have already summarised the view of Boas, who was one of the most prominent intellectuals of this school of thought. However, on the question of socio-cultural change the contributions of American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan are equally significant. Lewis Henry Morgan claimed that diffusionism was one of the mechanisms by which the substantial uniformity of socio-cultural evolution was made possible. The American Lewis Henry Morgan infuriated his British contemporaries, when his research demonstrated that social change involved both independent invention and diffusion. He agreed with British socio-cultural anthropologists that human progress was due to independent innovation, but his work on kinship terminology showed that diffusion occurred among geographically dispersed people.
In other words this school postulates that transformation occurs due to the diffusion of influences and traits from more developed centres to those which are less developed. Given this explanation all transformative changes in human history ought to emanate from culturally advanced centres. However, human transformation has rarely followed such linear process of change. History is littered with examples where impulse for change came from relatively less developed centres. For instance the emergence of feudal society, culture and identity was not result of influences and traits emanating from Rome that was the most advanced culture of the period but on the contrary it emerged due to the imposition of values, practices, traits and norms of the tribal society that overran the Roman empire. Similarly capitalism did not emerge in the advanced cultural centres such as China, Italy or even southern England, instead it emerged in the backward and rural northern England. In short processes of transformation are never linear instead they are always uneven. However, it is this unevenness in the processes of transformation that the diffusionist theory can not explain.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: 1) Your answer should be about 400 words;

2) You may check your answer with the possible answer given at the end of the Unit.

2) What are the main tenets of diffusionist theory on identity and transformation?

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3.4 PRIMORDIALIST THEORY

Let us now discuss the main arguments of the primordialist theory. Primordialist theory differs with some of the core assumptions and conclusions of the diffusionist theory. It is pertinent to point out here that the diffusionist theorists argue that owing to contact, trade, warfare etc. inventions and traits created in the advanced centres of culture get diffused to less developed centres whereby substantial uniformity of socio-cultural evolution is made possible. Primordialist theorists deny that this process of uniformity takes place. On the contrary they point out that ethnic boundaries persist despite interchange and intermingling, and cultural differences persist despite interethnic contact and interdependence. They argue that ethnic groups are not groups formed on the basis of a shared culture, but rather the formation of groups on the basis of cultural differences. According to the primordialists any process of change or transformation is never carried out in an abstract space but on the contrary on a space that is already inscribed by ethnic identities. In fact they go on to argue that ethnicity preludes
and underpins all process of change of a pre modern identity under the processes of contemporary times.

How these ethnic boundaries are created? What are the internal processes of constitution of an ethnic identity? These are some of the questions that we have already discussed while summarising Frederick Barth’s view in course 2, block 2, unit 2 above. In this section we are more interested in tackling how the primordialist theoreticians analyse that processes by with pre-modern ethnic identities relate with modern processes and determine the process of change and transformation. Just as Frederick Barth’s contribution was seminal in elaborating the concept of ethnic boundaries and the determination of the processes through which in everyday situation an individual relates with and makes sense of outside world, the contributions of Anthony B. Smith are extremely important in elaborating the processes through which ethnic identity determine the course of transformation in modern times.

In his influential book Theories of Nationalism, Anthony B. Smith states:

“it is ...(the) prior socialisation into traditional image and ethnic, and into the whole network of social relations which have been gradually built up around these convictions and prescriptions, that makes the confrontation between the modern ‘scientific state’ and the old cosmic outlook so serious. It is a total dilemma— in the mind and in daily action a difficult and painful choice is continually posed.”

It is this confrontation, as it were, of the two worlds that make it possible to account for not only the continuation but re-emergence of xenophobic ‘non-traditional’ identity even in the ‘modernising’ potential of nationalism.

Thus the primordialist theorists ascribe an extreme potency to tradition and pre-modern ethnicity. Since these theoreticians argue that the members of human groups have an “innate” propensity to distinguish between insiders and outsiders, to delineate social boundaries and to develop stereotypes about “the other”; it follows that the theory subscribes to the view that tradition and ethnicity is the cause of the construction and changes in identity. However, this is not always the case. Ernest Gellner has recounted how the identity of the Estonians does not seek any traditional root. Even in our country people belonging to the state of Bihar are identified as Biharis, yet no such identity existed prior to the 20th century. Primordialist theoreticians fail to take account of these ethnic aspects of construction and transformation of identities.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: 1) Your answer should be about 300 words;
      2) You may check your answer with the possible answer given at the end of the Unit.
      3) What are the main tenets of the Primordialist theory of identity and transformation?

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Let us now focus on the modernist/constructionist theory. Modernist/constructionist theoreticians conceptualise formation and transformation of identities in a way that is diametrically opposite to that of the primordialist theoreticians. While primordialist theoreticians ascribe absolute potency to the traditionally available ethnicity, the modernist theoreticians ascribe absolute generative power to the modern processes in the formation and transformation of identities. Thus, we witness that where as the primordialist theoreticians emphasise upon the ethnic aspects of identity, the modernist theoreticians emphasise upon the ethnic aspects of identity. It is to be emphasized that the modernist theoreticians do not necessarily deny that elements and traits of traditional identities may survive processes of change. However, they go on to argue that these traits and elements enter into a absolutely new relationship with other elements under the demands of the present conjuncture whereby the form and functions of these elements and traits undergo a fundamental change.

How does the present rework identities on this there are two significant explanations forwarded by the modernist theoreticians. In course 2, block 2, unit 2 above these arguments have been briefly stated but in a different context. It had been pointed out that Abner Cohen takes up the political aspects of the reconfiguration of identity while Epstein takes up the emotive aspects of the reconfiguration of identity. However, despite these differences both the scholars give primacy to the present in explaining the reconfiguration of identity. Given the significance of these two scholars in study of identities it will be well worth our while to briefly present how they take account of the formation and transformation of identities under the actions of modern processes.

According to Abner Cohen under specific circumstances ethnic communities undergo a process that he terms as retribalisation. Abner Cohen defines retribalisation as:

“a process by which a group from one ethnic category, whose members are involved in a struggle for power and privilege with the members of a group from another ethnic category, within the framework of a formal political system, manipulate some customs, values, myths, symbols and ceremonials from their cultural tradition in order to articulate an informal political organisation which is used as a weapon in that struggle.”

Epstein explains this reconfiguration from emotive standpoint. He regards the search for, and psychological need for, a sound, secure and more or less bounded social identity as fundamental, and connects this need - under particular historical circumstances - to the formation of ethnic identities. This stable and secure basis is threatened in periods of dramatic and rapid change. This change robs communities of security and the present appears before them as disconnected fragments of life. In such a scenario ethnicity as reconfigured past is an attempt to make whole the disconnected fragments of life made available by the present. Epstein views this emotive aspect of kinship as deriving from a sense of collective history, and from identification between generations.

The biggest drawback of this school is that it is extremely doubtful that past will make itself available as a completely plastic material amicable to manipulation.
Market and Cultural Property

in any direction. This failure to take account of the specific weight of past lends a certain artificiality to the theory which reduced formation and transformation of identities to a realm of manipulation and conspiracies.

Check Your Progress 4
Note: 1) Your answer should be about 400 words;
2) You may check your answer with the possible answer given at the end of the Unit.
4) What are the main tenets of modernist/constructionist theory of identity and its transformation?

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3.6 DIALECTICAL THEORY

Let us now discuss the dialectical theory. Dialectical theory views the process of formation and transformation of identity as a necessarily complex process. Furthermore it argues that no identity is homogeneous. It states that every identity far from being homogenous is necessarily complex and internally ruptured. Though the objective to study identities in their complexity seeks to understand them in historically and socially relevant ways, it is not so easy to achieve.

Theoretical studies on identity are dominated by rival claims of primordialism and constructionism. Constructionists argue that all identity, whether that of large entities such as nation or that of a community are adaptations to the process of modernisation. Contrary to this a rival group of theoreticians emphasises on primordial roots of every identity. Some amongst them, however, emphasise primordial social and cultural roots of identity while others take recourse to genetics and biological determinism. There are a wide variety of theoretical positions and the debate between them is cacophonous. The constructionist reduce the textures of identity to an uninterrupted and homogenous process of functional adjustments to the impact of process of modernity; while the primordialist reduce the textures of identity as nothing but ephemeral elaboration of a primordial root. Thus, even though the rival groups disagree of the causal process of identity formation—the modernists reduce it to the teleology of present and the primordialist reduce it to the teleology of past/origin—both agree that identities are essentially homogeneous and tend towards stability.

In course 2, block 2, unit 2, above, we had discussed the uneven process of dialectical exchange between the past and the present in the formation and
transformation of identity. It was indicated that this dialectical exchange is grounded on the contours of struggles that articulation of local with the transnational process and institutions unleashes. It had been indicated that construction of an identity follows the parameters of resistance or alternative mobilisation required to adequately address the extent of process and agencies of exploitation. The shifting contours and fault lines of struggle and exploitation ensure that formation and transformation of identities never follow linear and predictable process. Instead the process of formation and transformation of identities is marked by unevenness. In this section let us take the argument further and demonstrate that this same struggle ensures the identity constituted by it is never homogeneous but on the contrary is internally ruptured. We will demonstrate this by summarising the finds of a published study done by me on the case of Naga identity.

For a researcher, Naga identity presents two significant quandaries that seek explanation. Quandary number one is that for the peoples being studied it has often been the case that a pan-identity (here Naga) has co-existed with particularistic identities such as the tribal identity of Angami, Konyak, etc. Both these identities have a specific weight and a historical anchorage. Thus, even while a particular tribe acknowledges being a part of the larger pan-identity of Naga, it does not amount to the dissolution of the specific identity of the tribe. Quandry number two is that the relationship between the pan-identity and the particularistic identity is not always that which holds between a building block to an architectural edifice, what to speak of that of a drop to water. On the contrary the relationship amongst the particular identities and between them and the pan-identity are at time fractious whereby they become building blocks to competing and rival discourse. How does one take account of these quandaries?

Relationship between pan-Naga identity and particularistic identities, therefore, continues to pose a problem. The resolution to this by V. Elwin and G. Kabui leads to the erosion of historical materiality of particularistic identities. On the other hand, the resolution sought by Dr. Horam compromises the materiality of the pan-Naga identity. By projecting the pan-Naga identity as simply an aggregation of tribes identifying themselves as Naga he ignores the specific process and basis that sustains pan-Naga identity. Relation between the two forms of identity appears as a Gordian knot to these scholars since their work is based on the disciplines of anthropology and sociology. Consequently they see the two forms of identity as a pre-given anthropological/sociological datum. Thence, they seek to unravel the anthropological or sociological principles and basis on which the two identities ought to relate.

Anthropological and sociological reductionism precludes these scholars from observing that one of the fundamental processes that determine the existent (as opposed to the desirable) relationship is derived not from anthropological or sociological logic but from a deeply fractious political process and discourse. This results in a peculiar situation, whereby anthropologists and sociologists might be correct in arguing that the relationship between pan-Naga identity and the particularistic tribal and regional identity ought to be governed by anthropological or sociological logic. Yet asymmetrical political structure and fractious political processes that it unleashes may (and in the case of the Nagas it has) result in the inscription of the two forms of identity in contending political discourses.
The fact of existence of related but distinct form of identities viz. the pan-Naga identity and the particularistic tribal and regional identities have made them significant ingredients of two competing political agenda—that of Naga nationalism and Indian nationalism. Elements who perceive themselves as Naga nationalist have since the inception of this ideology made the existent pan-Naga identity as a potent ingredient of their political discourse to achieve hegemony over the political consciousness of the Nagas. Claims of uniqueness, distinctiveness and common roots of the Naga ‘nation’ is the specific trait of this discourse.

The older colonial and current Indian nationalist discourse privileges the particularistic identity. State’s political initiatives and policy measures have always reflected this privileging of particularistic identity. Particularistic identity is privileged to unravel the claim of the political rivals to being the representative voice of the Nagas and/or erode the cohesiveness of the pan-Naga identity. Such inscription of the pan-Naga identity as well as the particularistic tribal and regional identities in political discourses opens up an entirely new angle. Thus, while the pan-Naga identity and the particularistic tribal identity have sociological and anthropological basis, their inscription in political discourse determines the relation between the two. This primacy of politics in determining the relationship between the pan-Naga identity and the particularistic tribal identities can explain why a ethnically and linguistically non-Naga tribe such as Kuki could be included as Naga in the memorandum of the Naga Hills to the Simon Commission but later viewed as a hostile group.

Thus dialectical theory gives primacy to the historically determined processes of exploitation and struggle as the main elements in the formation and transformation of identities.

**Check Your Progress 5**

**Note:**
1) Your answer should be about 300 words;
2) You may check your answer with the possible answer given at the end of the Unit.
3) What are the main tenets of dialectical theory of identity and its transformation?

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3.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have discussed some of the major theories that try to explain why identities change over time or across space. We have discussed the evolutionist model which argues that the change in identity can generally be seen in terms of progress from early to developed stages of civilization. Then we discussed the diffusionist model that argue change as a result of contact between ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ cultures resulting in the latter assuming traits of the former. In our discussion of the primordialist theory, we showed how the theory considers change to be based on inherent and intrinsic traits that any community is constituted with. The discussion on modernist/constructionist theory tried to explain how the theory emphasises the role of the present factors, mostly political, rather than any factor from the past as crucial to understand why change of identity takes place. In the last theory that we took up for discussion, the dialectical theory, we discussed how the theory emphasises the role of both the past and the present and its specific interactions in given historical circumstances as the way to understand why identities change and why and how new identities comes into existence.

3.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

1) Check section 1.2

2) Check section 1.3

3) Check section 1.4

4) Check section 1.5

5) Check section 1.6