Unit 22
Identity, Nation-State and Diaspora

Contents

Learning Objectives

This unit will help you understand:

- The Concepts and Interrelationship of Identity, Globalisation and Diaspora;

- Indian Diasporic Identity in the New Global World; and

- Cross-Border Identities.

22.1 Introduction

Globalisation is a process that has a reach in every corner of the globe is a reality of today's world. Migration of people, services and capital is an integral part of globalisation. Trends in migration are also different as compared to earlier migratory trends across the world. This leads to the rise of the concept of trans-nationalism that involves flows of culture, capital and human beings across borders. Political boundedenss in the form of nations and national territorial units have somewhere been enmeshed within the globalisation process and have at times become fluid. Identity formation of the different groups within this particular process is therefore diverse and different. The diasporic communities, such as the Indian Diaspora are one of the populations that straddle the globalisation process. In this unit we will discuss some of the issues which are a result of far reaching effects of gloablisation, namely the new emerging identies of communities who locate themselves in more than one place.

22.2 Conceptual Clarification

Different concepts such as 'globalisation' 'diaspora', 'transnationalism' and 'identity formation' are used to construct the discussion here. All these terms have no one particular meaning, rather they are defined by taking help of some other concepts that are interlinked and interdependent to bring out the myriad meanings that each of them possess. Albrow defines globalisation as "all those processes by which peoples of the world are incorporated into a single world society, global society". Most of these processes have a plural nature. Globalisation in the economic arena means the internationalisation of capital along with expansion of capitalist market relations. It is the economic processes that ushered in the globalisation process. Flow of capital across cultural regions and political borders laid the

base for creation of fluid boundaries; this process is essentially grounded in the patterns of capitalistic trade. The economic patterns of unequal growth across the world fashioned the capital flows wherein different companies were able to have major financial operations as well as considerable organisational presence in several countries simultaneously.

This process in turn created a moving population following the requirements of skills in the passage of capital creating networks of work relations, activities and socio cultural life designs that include their place of origin and several destinations simultaneously. Transnationalism is defined as "the process by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement. Immigrants who build such social fields are designated 'transmigrants'. Their lives cut across national boundaries and bring two societies into a single social fold". Therefore, development of transnational migration is intricately linked to the changing conditions of global capitalism and must be analysed within the world context" Today, they form an important component of any diasporic community.

Herein, the manner in which a Diaspora is defined is of utmost importance, since this also has an impact on how the diasporic community perceives and later on strengthens its identity. The word diaspora relates to the ideas of a community longing for its homeland. In the beginning, this was applied to the Jewish community as they conceptualized their homeland as an imagined locality without any real territoriality. In the present times, this word denotes any community that has migrates, regardless of its causes for migration, and 'its attendant anxieties of displacement, homelessness and a wish to return, then the case for considering overseas communities of Indian origin as a diaspora appears far stronger'. They are also characterized by the essentialising ideals of boundedness and the unity of locality and culture. Culture becomes one of the most important factors around which the Indian diaspora builds up its identities.

Cohen (1997) argues that a diaspora can emerge from a growing sense of group ethnic consciousness in different countries, a consciousness that is sustained by, amongst other things, a sense of distinctiveness, common history and a belief in common fate.

Identity formation processes and the actors that determine these processes within the diaspora can be located in the 'theoretical space shared by constructivism and liberalism'. Even in their unique position of being spatially located outside the home state, their identity perception remains constant, as the 'inside people' give enormous emphasis to the kinship identity. Moreover, the host country population, and their home country population also share this perception; their identity perception does not just change just because their locality of residence and occupation has changed. Barth's (1969) argument that identities in the form of ethnicities is essentially the construction and maintenance of boundaries; thereafter identity formation has been often interpreted as the essences of identity and are viewed by many 'as the content of an ongoing process of boundary construction, being constantly reinvented and shifted according to the requirements of the situation'.

22.3 Globalisation: Transnational Networks and Identities

The Indian diaspora is by no means a new phenomenon, it has existed since the first trading routes in the world were established. The Indian

diasporic communities were traders in Africa, South East Asia and the Mediterranean shores as well as religious preachers in South East Asia maintaining extensive kinship and economic networks. Large scale migration of Indians in the nineteenth and twentieth century is a phenomenon of the colonial demand for labour in the distant colonies. This forms the old diaspora. The old diaspora of India consists of the Indian population of the earlier indentured labour in the sugar colonies of Caribbean, Africa and Oceania, free or passenger emigrants in Oceania and East Africa and Kangani /maistry labour to Burma, Malaysia and Ceylon.

Since Indian emigration to the West European countries also took place in response to demand for various categories of labour, and professionals after the Second World War. The difference between the PIO and the NRI though is not much in these countries, yet, the second generation of the settlers have shown a different picture of the various processes that help govern identity formation.

The uniqueness of the presence of Indian diaspora in the western world lies in the fact that it is primarily a post World War II phenomenon; also, it is essentially a skill-based emigration. This has in turn shaped the identity formation processes and the nature of the identity thus formed within the diasporic Indian community inhabiting the Western nations. In the classification of waves of movements of the Indian Diaspora, this emigration is said to be the second wave of migration. Thus diaspora studies offer a critical perspective on the very visible thematic of cultural migrancy and on debates about transnationalism and post colonialism that find a resonance in the resurgent multicultural debates.

The old diasporic Indian community's essential character remained undeniably Indian, as is witnessed in the grocery stores that abound across the world, the enormous growth in the population going to the theaters and cinemas screening bollywood films and the increasing number of the various types of places of worship, be it gurudwaras, temples or mosques, The Indian diaspora as a group clings on to its identity as INDIANS. "If we listen to the steady but vigorous dialogue within its confines, best embodied in the views of young writers and publications within the community, these concerns are about being an Indian. It is about maintaining one's own culture, traditions and values, starting from family values and celebrating all things Indian".

The Indian diasporic community is not one ethnic whole, as is used in the description of ethnicity used to describe diasporas as one coherent ethnicity. This view is not exactly corroborated in the case of the Indian diaspora since it is not a one cohesive or ethnic identity, delineated sharply in religion, language, caste, locality and territorial bias. Many scholars such as Parekh (1993) and Vertovec (2000) and Baallard, (2004) consider religion to be the one of the primary elements that defines/classifies the Indian diasporic community, the one thread that provides the commonality, distinctiveness and shared history. In this context, religion as well as culture provide an ascriptive measure of social differentiation and offer a symbolic resource for belongingness. Yet, Hinduism is considered to be the 'ethnic religion' that is defined by a strong sense of 'rootedness in India' as is argued by Parekh (1993). About 85% of the people of Indian origin and the non-resident Indians are Hindus, for whom the idea of 'Mother India' holds deep spiritual symbolic and sentimental reverence that is renewed through regular visits and pilgrimages. This common identity that has been forged is so strong that it has also become a resource for political mobilization conducted by the Hindu right and the Hindutva forces in the diaspora. This

is not an all-inclusive religious or cultural category as it excludes some of the minority faiths that have substantial followers within the diasporic community. The Indian diasporic community in Europe is divided in terms of religion, as faiths other than Hinduism such as Islam, Zoaroshtrianism, Sikhism and Jainism also have their own gatherings, yet, ultimately they also brand themselves as Indians and thus emerges the sub group of Indian muslims to cite an example.

Indian society is particularly charcaterised by the presence of caste groups; this is second category that is used as a symbol of identity that is used within the Indian diaspora denoting diversity, locality and difference. This is the site of narratives, struggles and territoriality deeply rooted in the sense of locality amongst the thinly segmented caste communities. 'This is at times reproduced through new networks and technologies' (Patel (2000) quoted in Singh). Though in some cases caste as a factor in identity construction has become weakened, in Europe, amongst the older generation settlers this was a major point of self-identification. Tied to this are the stocks of social and the cultural capital that were shared amongst the various communities that helped them gain prosperity and reach the present levels of development. The change in the attitude towards caste is seen clearly in the younger generation who grew up in the host nations and to whom the host nations became the homeland.

Thirdly, language or region of origin is used as a marker of identity amongst the Indian disapora in Europe as the regional identities became more powerful where common language formed an important link. The importance of the intertwine of language and region is seen in the various cultural communities of Tamil, Telegu, Malayalam, Bengali and Gujarati associations, where communities comprise of different religions and caste but speak the same language and form the same region. This is more clearly brought out in the networks that exist within the community and encompasses people from various segments in its fold. Moreover, this is the site of passing on the oral traditions that are inculcated on an individual family basis. So linguistic affiliation brings into its fold the manifolds of culture that plays a significant role in the construction of identity.

Taking all the above factors and processes into consideration, perhaps the core feature that defines the Indian diaspora is its collective imagining of India – of emotions, links, traditions, feelings and attachments that together continue to nourish a psychological and sociological appeal among the successive generations of emigrants for the mother country.

To comprehend this reality in the changing nature of the identity formation amongst the Indian diasporic community, one has to look into the elements that will focus on the contradictions, the processes of exclusion, the fissures in the memories of successes and selective silences on the happenings that no one wants to acknowledge.

Reflection and Action 22.1

What do you understand by transnational communities?

22.4 Indian Diasporic Identity in the New Global World

The last forty odd years that saw the emergence of the Indian diaspora as a major force within the world community is the saga of its progress and

achievements. Though there were several hiccups (in the form of racial hatred that they encountered from the host nations) that at times led to race riots, the Indian diasporic community strove towards development that paid off so well that today they are a force to be reckoned with in their own particular spheres. The impact of the globalisation process is seen in the diasporic Indian community's qualities of resilience and continuity wherein all the fragments manage to coexist together. Without this feature, they might not have reached the present levels of achievement and development that has marked their rise. This was accompanied by an increasing visibility in the host nation's public life as well as the cultural sphere. The picture of harmony and equality that they projected is the one that is concurrent in the imagining of the majority of the world today. So, 'curry' has become almost the national food of Britain and Indian soul music the most in thing of the music world, making them a glorious picture of accomplishment. Yet, 'the image of the Indian community situated on a road to perfect harmony defined by the mainstream may equally be seen in a different light ... the temptations of measuring any historical phenomenon in terms of progress are attractive but they do not grasp the complexity of uneven development and even more importantly, they miss the elements of contradiction, a rich and veritable presence of forces that shape diasporic identity'.

The problems at first exist on the generational levels. 'The second and third generational issues are of main concern to the internal mechanics of how the Indian community functions and how it treads the waters of an aggressively and rapidly changing culture' and these concerns surface as a major issue of representation in cultural gatherings, writings and even films and television shows' in the European Union. The tendency to define themselves as Indians is predisposed by the wish to ascertain themselves as non-resident Indians. The inherent dualism is what creates the question mark; a wish to cling on to the mythical homeland that exists on only in their memories. As the new generation does not posses any such memory, therefore, their identifications with this becomes problematic.

Their conception of themselves is not one of a life in exile, forced by the extenuating circumstances but that of a natural acceptance of the place where they grow up as their homeland. They do not require the anchor of the homeland so as to construct their own identity. The older generation who have though adjusted to the new configuration of their hostlands would yet like to adhere to the India that lives on in their memories and at times who refuse to face up to the reality of today's India. So they are enthralled by the constructed identities set in their own frames of reference. What happens is, that they then begin to believe the surreal image as projected by the filmmakers and this carries forward the culture of the homeland. The nostalgia embedded in the older generation's memories that they present to their children makes it difficult for the present generation to compute with the present day India.

Moreover, the new generation also has a problem with the 'Indian' identity with that of the primarily linguistic or community based identity that is built by the older generation. The adoption of the multiple identities as Tamils or Gujaratis first and then Indians also confuses them. They also find it difficult to differentiate between the two afore mentioned identities. The adoption of multiple identities and the ease with which the Indians slip in and out of and into the other is also bewildering, and then comes the posit: which one is better and which one to adopt? Added to this is their own identity as British Indians or French Indians/Asians etc. The small segments based on regional and linguistic delineation also creates a locale

where the value judgment is made as to what should be passed on to new generation and what should not be, leaving the younger generation with the biases that linger on amongst the older generation.

The rise of an underclass among immigrant Indians has grown sizeably over the past two decades. Yet their concerns, struggles and issues have not yet registered with conscience in the media or the public life of Indians. Mostly survival is the only thought in their minds and they identify with the poor, identification processes then become even more difficult as they have to deal with dual resistance from the immigrant well settled population and the native populations.

The new generation also faces a problem in that though they adhere to the imagined India of their parents' memories, they do not have any desire to come back to India as very simply they do not fit in. They have thus sought different methods to assert their identities. Whereas the earlier generation was content to remain as passive actors in the international arena, now they choose to assert themselves. The interest groups of the Indian diaspora in the western world now have a visibility that was lacking before. Here the point to mention is that 'identity does not always determine interests, ... some times identity is the interest. Since identities and interests are determined by social interaction, there is space here for domestic actor participation. This domestic actor has now gained enough credibility on the world stage to stake its own claim on its diaspora as has been the case with India. Now is the time when the Indian diaspora wants to know India and India also wants to know them. The result is the policy initiative in the form of dual citizenship. 'Consequently the process of identity construction becomes purely political and pits conflicting actors against each other ... it is a conflict over power to determine national identity'. Thus the diasporas become dynamic.

In the context of the Indian diasporas this dynamism is further accelerated by the infusion of young blood in the form of the new recruited members of the software and information technology who then become an intrinsic part of the per-existing diasporic community. They project their identity as a pan Indian identity, undoing the shackles of the earlier forces of language, region, religion etc. This is the identity that then is put in front of the new generation of the diasporic community, who are in turn baffled by its complexity

The problems of integration that are faced by the new generation amongst the Indian diaspora is not easy, they do not at times fit in with their imagined home land as well as the host land where they have grown up. The discrimination thus faced makes them frustrated and they adopt different methods of assimilation. The xenophobia and racial discrimination that the Indian diaspora faces in the European Union has also been acknowledged by Dr. Willem van der Geest, Director, European Institute for Asian Studies, Brussels in his inaugural speech on the occasion of the GOPIO conference held in Brussels in November 2004.

Moreover, the segmented societies that exist within the Indian diasporic community at times pose threats to the relations between the host land and homeland. Here, the identity formation is on extremely narrow fanatical ideals and this becomes an embarrassment for both the nations in the international arena. These contribute to the changing nature of the identity formation processes within the Indian diasporic community. None doubt the emergence of the Indian diasporic community as a force to be reckoned

with in the host nation and also its impact on the homeland as well as the increasing complex relations it has with the economy and society it is located in.

Since processes of identity formation never occur outside the socio-political and cultural contexts, with the changes in these situations the processes of identity formation will also change. This event will not manifest itself in an event one day but will slowly happen as a series of small and perhaps irrelevant events that escape notice.

22.5 Nation States: Cross Border Identities

Transnational capital and labour flows that have fuelled changes in the identity formation have had minimal impact on the idea of the nation states. Nation state in itself presents a double image, state, that is the political category with a territorial boundedness and sovereign powers of governance and the nation a constructed cultural category. Together, the term denotes the nation that has existed prior to the state. The nation states of the world are unequal in terms of both political and economic power and occupy different niches in the globalisation process. Thus, globalisation is in itself a binding factor in the world showing that economic flows that control international migration also shape "the migrant's responses to these forces and strategies of their survival, cultural practices and identities within the world wide historical context of differential power and inequality".

It was assumed that the progress of globalisation would loosen the bonds of nation states, yet, this has not happened. The pre-eminence in the existence of nation states can be correlated with the identity formation of the immigrant communities and the relationship between their social and political affiliations and ethnic loyalties. It is observed, "the transnational context of migrants' lives develops from the interplay of multiplex phenomena – historical experience, structural conditions and ideologies of their home and host societies". Economic dislocations cause vulnerability amongst the migrants resulting in transmigration in search of security. Thus during the first Gulf War in 1991 thousands of Indian immigrant workers who had to leave from the Persian Gulf nations moved on to African, Australian and American shores, the pre-existing socio-economic networks that opened up to absorb the stress helped them. These networks had been maintained by recurrent communications to and with their home societies whose patterns of culture is a part of the daily lives of the immigrants. This also highlights the importance of remittances sent by them to their homeland and that in provide them with security in times of stress. The transmigrants are therefore rooted in two cultures: both their home and host societies creating several identities that they use simultaneously depending on the context. This multiple identity formation of the transmigrants' also is their articulation of resistance to political and economic upheavals experienced by them even as they construct their survival mechanism. The Fijian Indian population who fled Fiji following the various coups to Australia and New Zealand have slowly and steadily relocated to other parts of the world. The sense of insecurity also prompts them to maintain these multiple identities, as they do not know which path/identity will sustain them in crisis.

The class relation within the transmigrant society is well defined and dominated by the interests and ideologies of both the host and home countries. These dominations are stable arenas of creation and renewal of class/caste continuum within the Indian diasporic community. This in turn

is related to the experiences of nation-building of the transmigrants', pointing to the continued importance of the category of the nation states. Together they create a multicultural society that acknowledges the existence of pluralsocia groups/ethnicities/races.

The multicultural contexts created by contemporary large-scale skilled labour migration, often willingly, create complex international bonds that are difficult to explain in commonly accepted understanding. This is accentuated in the case of the receiving nations as they are "awash with the fear that they are inundated with refugees, though dealing with but a fraction of the world's total, has contributed to a sense of siege, one in which anti-immigration platforms have well been served". Multiculturalism is usually understood as the 'inclusion of cultural differences within the formal institutions of representative government and civil society, it is best understood specifically to describe one possible political response by a host government to various forms of migrancy'. What this translates into, is the civility of nationalism wherein enfranchisement of migrated people whether current or residing for a longer period is granted.

Though many of the Western nation states endorse the concept, yet, their political processes exhibits a diametrically opposite tendency as is witnessed in the New Constitution for Europe that seeks to define the kind of belonging that could be best enumerated as the "OLD Idea of Europe". This brings out the real differences in the conceptualizations and the implementations of the policy of multiculturalism. This has been exacerbated in the wake of the destruction 9 / 11/2001, when the entire world has been refashioned into camps of they, and us, the eurocentred world against the barbaric tribalisms that exist in certain states. Paradoxically, it is within these years that the Indian diaspora has received a fillip in the concretization of their identification process as an "Indian" beginning with the large-scale celebrations of the 'Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas'. Simultaneously, it is also true that "Europe is as much the site of longings rooted in tradition- regional, national and European – as is a site of transnational and trans European attachments ... Slowly, Europe is becoming Chinese, Indian, Romany, Alabnian ... drawing on the varied geographies of cultural formation". Yet, accompanying the cosmopolitan consumption comes ethnic loyalty as a source of identity building process along with communal security and cultural nourishment. This is actually the cause for the increased calls and maintenance for ethnicity and cultural based schools, cultural and religious autonomy and an attempt to travel to the 'homeland' or re-enactment and revitalization of the histories and narratives of the diaspora. This reactivated interest in the homeland is exactly what is now being witnessed in the case of the Indian Diaspora, a diaspora that is concerned with "the interaction of space, identity and power, particularly at the geopolitical scale". Thus, there is resurgence in the interest of the second generation Indian diaspora towards the political scenario in the 'homeland' meaning India.

This could also be constructed as a change in the identity formation processes, wherein, a diaspora could be reconstructed as minimalising the impact of the experience of loss of the concerned cultural location and reaffirming the processes of culture, territoriality and identity construction. The second generation thus continues to forge its identity with the perceived homeland.

Refelection and Action 22.2

What are the ways in which Indians articulate their sense of identity? How is the nation-state implicated in the globalisation process?

22.6   Conclusion

Identity formation at any time is the positioning of several actors, and intrinsically has an 'us' and 'they' context. The projection of the 'self' is always in response to the 'other' and as these change, the projection of the self's identity also changes. This is what is happening within the diasporic Indian community. The identity formation processes if counted as an end product becomes difficult to compute as they are in a fluid state of changing identities and moving on to multiple identities that a person can project at the same time. Moreover, 'it cannot be one homogenous model of identity that equally serves all members of a group ... we must be ready to ask for different and shifting levels of identity as for conflicting and contesting designs.

22.7   Further Reading

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