
UNIT 3 CULTURAL STRATEGY FOR ASSERTING IDENTITY

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 The problem of identity
 - 3.2.1 Identity and culture: definitions and theories
 - 3.2.2 Culture
 - 3.2.3 Identity, culture and politics
 - 3.2.4 Identity in India
 - 3.2.5 Psychology and identity
 - 3.2.6 Levels of identity
 - 3.2.7 Identity and modernization
- 3.3 Cultural strategy
 - 3.3.1 Autonomy and agency
 - 3.3.2 Performance studies
- 3.4 Case studies of cultural strategies for asserting identity
 - 3.4.1 Martial arts as paths to identity
 - 3.4.2 Tribal identity through music
 - 3.4.3 Religious ritual and *puja* drumming in a tribal setting
- 3.5 Let us sum up
- 3.6 Glossary
- 3.7 Check your progress: possible answers
- 3.8 Activities
- 3.9 References and further readings

3.0 OBJECTIVES

This module will examine the problems of identity among the tribes in India, the variety of cultural strategies for asserting this identity and the multiple political and personal agendas of identity. The concept of identity and the various social theories that are used to explain cultural and social interactions will be described. After completing this module you will be able to:

- understand the different ways identity is constructed and how identity is performed;
- be aware of various theories of identity;
- gain understanding of political processes which are involved in identity politics and be able to see these processes at work around you;
- gain a clearer understanding of your own identity and how it relates to larger social relationships; and
- understand the performative nature of identity and the discipline of performance studies.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

We will first examine different interpretations of identity, different ways in which identity is formed and expressed, and some of the sociological frameworks which seek to explain the dynamics of a society. We will then examine the relation of the state to local identities, and look at specific cultural strategies for the preservation of identity. We will employ a specific case study of the Jaunsari tribe of the Northwest Himalayas to look at these questions in depth.

3.2 THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY

Identity might seem like a simple concept. However, it is actually quite complex. The concept of identity has changed throughout the years. Many cultures have differing conceptions of identity. We will look at a number of ways this problem is formulated, and how it impacts our understanding of culture, society, and the individual. Identity is something that many people take for granted. However, identity is at the very heart of many conflicts throughout the world. Understanding identity gives us an opportunity to better understand ourselves and the world around us.

3.2.1 Identity and culture: definitions and theories

Identity is a central concern for the field of sociology, social psychology and cultural anthropology. Although many facets of identity are not agreed upon, it is generally agreed that identity is a social construct that refers to how the individual is perceived and labeled by the self and by society. Behaviors, physical attributes, memberships, and social roles determine the position of the individual in the world. It is the public face of the person in the world, and is the basis for their relationship to society. Some important qualities of identity are that it is constructed, relational, and performed.

What do we mean by the statement that identity is constructed? First of all, construction implies that something composed of discrete units that are held together. A house is made of separate elements which brought together make a house. There is a roof, a floor, a door and windows. For an individual there are also many elements which compose their identity. For example, age, gender, language, and profession can all be components of someone's identity. Another meaning of the word "constructed" is that the components are arbitrary and contingent upon choices which are made, either consciously or unconsciously. A house can be built of wood or concrete, and in fact what defines a house can differ greatly between societies. For a forest dwelling tribesman, a house might simply be composed of a bark roof and reeds, while for an urban dweller; a house would be made of very different materials. In a similar fashion, the components, which determine identity, are often determined culturally. Elements which might be extremely important in one society may have little or no relevance in another culture. For example, the ability to survive winter in the Arctic by making snowshoes has no value in London.

Relationship is the second quality of importance in identity. Identity can be visualized as a collection of interlocking circles, with larger circles which represent wider social configurations. The relational nature of identity means that it can be created either as towards or away from something, and as inclusive

or exclusive. That is, an individual can define their identity as positively identifying with a trait, for example “I am a Hindu” or in the negative “I am not a Muslim”. The relational nature of identity extends to many levels, including kinship relationships, ethnic identities, religious identities, and personal characteristics. These interlocking figures can transform and be transformed by individuals. Collective identities can be asserted as a means to relate or exclude others. For example, the statement “I am an Indian” contains a certain number of assumptions, which are probably unspoken or unconscious. Gandhi’s self-definition of that identity would be far different from a westernized businessman, or a villager, yet all three individual could truthfully make the same statement.

The final component in identity is its performance. To perform means to display through actions. Performance also implies a set of conditions within which this performance is intelligible, and is meaningful both for the actor (the agent or performer) and the audience. What do we mean by performing an identity? If one is a scholar, they would perform this aspect of their identity by conducting research, by teaching, or writing. If one has a particular religious identity, by performing certain religious ceremonies, visiting shrines, or reading certain texts, one would reinforce this identity. This has been described as a “cultural performance” by the scholar Milton Singer. However, the performance of identity can also take place on an unconscious and/or embodied level. Certain gestures, the distance between individuals in different cultures, ways of speaking, and many other things can be part of social and personal identities. Pierre Bourdieu defines this as the “habitus”, which, he says, is inscribed on the physical body as psycho-physiological patterns of conditioning. An important part of this concept is that fact that these patterns are not made conscious unless they are violated. For example, in India, many people do not point the bottoms of their feet at others, as it is considered to be disrespectful. An individual, brought up in this culture probably would not consciously think about this, until a visitor from another culture sat down with the soles of their feet pointed towards them. This action would reveal a particular belief by its violation.

3.2.2 Culture

Culture refers to the interconnected collective symbols, practices and meanings specific to a society or a group of persons within a society. There are several theories about the value of culture. Some felt that culture provides the basis for social cohesion and harmony, with norms and values (Talcott Parsons). Newcomers to the society have to integrate to the norms, or ideals of the culture. The Marxist Birmingham School, under Raymond Williams, defined culture as the expression of the ideology and interests of the ruling classes, and felt that capitalism and mass culture would prevent the growth of a thinking class, and weaken democracy. Two other theorists, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, have posited that the act of knowing the culture, or being culturally adept, confer power on a person and create unequal groups. Elements of all these theories can aid in understanding group identity. Being part of a specific or identifiable culture creates a sense of group identity, and reinforces as well aspects of personal identity.

3.2.3 Identity, culture and politics

Identity is important on personal, social and political levels. For a nation-state, the construction of a national identity has many purposes. Separate political,

ethnic and tribal groups often have agendas and aims that conflict with those of the state. For example, a hydroelectric project might require the relocation of thousands of individuals. In order for groups to accept the relocation, it would be necessary for them to have larger identity that included the needs of others geographically separated from them. This would require the project to reconstruct this group's identity so as to align them with the State's objectives.

When this reconstruction effort fails, extreme violence can erupt, as in the break-up of Yugoslavia, where the destructive assertion of specific ethnic identities led to fragmentation of a country into many small states.

3.2.4 Identity in India

The Indian sub-continent is a complex patchwork of linguistic, cultural, and geographic differences. The recently formed state of Uttaranchal, formerly part of the state of Uttar Pradesh, exemplifies the political volatility of regional identities and beliefs. Language, social mores, religious beliefs and practices, and performative systems (including music, dance and ritual) all find unique regional expressions. The Garhwal regional of Uttaranchal itself contains several distinct languages¹ and religious systems. The importance of various cultural practices in the creation and reinforcement of these regional identities cannot be underestimated. Even within a regional cultural system, diverse layers of social practices and religious systems co-exist.

During and after the independence struggle, identity was an important factor. Gandhi's attempt to create a unified India was based on a strategy of creating wider circles of identity that included the "other", whether that of the lower castes or different religious groups. These same factors were also manipulated by other players. The final result of England's divide and rule policy's was the creation of Pakistan, a separate political entity based on religious beliefs. However, the cultural similarities between India and Pakistan are much greater than between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, even though both are predominantly Muslim countries. You can see that identity has multiple levels of significance, and can create great benefits or tremendous bloodshed.

3.2.5 Psychology and identity

Psychology and philosophy have long focused on the "self", the personal subjective entity that is the "experiencer" of the external world. Recently, anthropology has begun to examine the subjective agent, the "self", which is the locus of all experience. Post-modernism, a school of thought currently in vogue has taken the constructed or arbitrary notion of the self to an extreme position known as deconstruction, which claims that all identity is provisional and dependant on tacit assumptions. However, traces of these beliefs can be found in the ancient Hindu philosophy's division between the small, individual self (ultimately unreal), and the universal self (*atman*) which is the true experiencer of the phenomenal world. The ethnomusicologist Judith Becker has argued that sense of "self", or personal identity, differs between cultures, thus allowing for possession and trance in some instances, and its contrary.

According to the philosopher Derek Parfit, identity is composed of a multiple, sometimes mutually antagonistic, "family of selves," including the present 'I', past and future 'I's', the ancestral self, and many others. This pluralistic concept

of the self functions through the “mental continuity relationship,” in which streams of mental events over time, link this “family of selves” into a relatively stable whole. This synchronic conception allows for the relative strength and weakness of certain aspects of personal continuity, depending upon the importance of particular streams of experience.

Identity is a complex of mental, physical, and spatio-temporal identifications. Implicit in this is the need for the re-creation or reaffirmation of identity, and the enactment of ritual performances can be essential to this process. Identity is not merely a mental process, but something that also occurs in the body, as a psycho-physiological process that ‘entrains’ the individual to a larger cultural process. Culture is manifested through the actions of living beings. Identity is fundamentally a relational process, wherein the individual defines and negotiates in themselves, relations either toward or against family, society, religion, and so on. In the caste system, the proscription and prohibition of specific behaviors are central components of caste identity, and are also manifested in spatial and linguistic hierarchical systems. This parallels Bourdieu’s concept of the bodily *hexis* which are fixed motor patterns, bodily postures and speech patterns that are acculturated during childhood, often unconsciously, and are, in effect, the social transcribed on an organic individual. Bourdieu’s concept of the *habitus*, “the durably installed principle of regulated improvisation” has immense value in the study of implicit social rules and takes into account the phenomenological experiences of participants’ fields, but the rather deterministic nature of the *habitus* does not allow for direct resistance, or true agency outside of the conditioned field of personal and social identity framed by the *habitus*.

The fluid, negotiated, and performative nature of identity is evident in ritual transitions between day-to-day and transitional social and psychic spaces. Many cultural practices, including music, facilitates and marks the transition into liminal realms and the return to ‘everyday reality’. In Jaunsar-Bawar, as well as in much of India, the veil separating the divine from the mundane is made transparent on a daily and/or calendrical basis in religious practice, and this process is considered of central importance to the well being of the community.

3.2.6 Levels of identity

As mentioned above, there are many layers that formulate identity. These layers often interact in complex ways, and are situationally dependant. Let us examine some of the important components of identity. On an individual level, one of the most primary identifications is with the family. The size of the family and immediate social unit in a particular culture and/or situation can vary widely. A child also acquires a language, which is another important component of identity. So too is the child’s relationship with themselves, including gender, body type, and other factors. These localized identities are linked with larger social structures which include extended kinship relationships, religious and caste identity, and identity in relation to the other, which could be other tribes, outside visitors, or government officials.

The complex interplay of identity and situation means that identity can be expressed in a variety of ways. It also means that aspects of a particular group’s identity can be threatened deliberately by outside intervention. An example of this is cultural change brought about by foreign invaders of other religions, which

may change not only religious practice, but long-standing cultural customs. What we call identity is a process, not a static entity. It is the link between larger and smaller social units, and between the state and local entities.

These distinctions have been described as differences between 'communities' and 'societies'. The term 'community' has been used to describe a type of social configuration based on shared collective beliefs and identities that often supersede individual choice. For anthropologists, the community and communal social relations are characterized by several factors. These include cultural continuity, wherein similar practices, customs, and beliefs are maintained over generations. Communities also foster intense feelings of solidarity, of deep inter-personal connections, and shared visions and goals.

Community is contrasted with a 'society' wherein individual come together for shared objectives, but these objectives can be mutually exclusive. A comparison of village life with city life makes this apparent. The rules of society are enforced by laws, not necessarily by voluntary agreement. In an urban environment, many differing groups may live in close proximity to one another and have little in common. The close bounds that are found in a community are replaced by an agreed upon and enforced 'social contract', often with an economic emphasis. In a city, many people of diverse backgrounds can come in an attempt to gain economic advantage, and during this process still retain their unique cultural beliefs.

3.2.7 Identity and modernization

In the process of modernization, the forms of identity linked with communities have often been viewed as roadblock to processes of modernization. The community values could be replaced by more 'rational' belief systems and allow the development of individuality, in the modern sense. These processes can be seen at work all around the world. The process or lack of assimilation is often used as a designator of particular ethnic and cultural groups to measure their success in the process of modernization. In coming section, we will examine some of the cultural strategies employed by particular groups in this process.

Identity often becomes the focal point of political movements, which are also often linked with the quest for political autonomy in a specific geographic region. Two examples of this from recent history include the separatist movements in Punjab and Assam. In Assam, the separatist's movements were linked with economic hardships, land ownership issues, and cultural devastation. However, in Punjab, these factors appear not to be relevant, as it was one of the most economically successful regions in India.

The complex relationships between individuals, between castes and genders, between ethnic minorities and larger political/ social identities are not easily resolved into simple formula. One problem with the simplification of identity implicit in many projects of modernization is that it doesn't take into account the multiple levels upon which identity operates. Identity, fluid, constructed, and performed, can, ideally link the individuals to a larger social and historical continuum. These linkages are created in many ways, through many modalities, and their disruption can lead to psychological and social unrest. However, it must be kept in mind that cultural and community identities are not static entities, but are interacting and living systems

One final point to keep in mind is that identity can often be manipulated and/or employed to serve larger political aims. This process of the manipulation of ethnic, religious, caste or other modalities of identity can be utilized by all players in a particular conflict, from the state to the separatist movements. Identity is a complex and powerful motivating factor in all types of human cultures and societies. For the tribes of India, the assertion of identity and the sustenance of cultural traditions are a matter of survival. The survival of the community is linked with ecological factors as much as with social and political roles. We will now discuss particular types of cultural strategies and look at several specific case studies.

Check your progress 1

Note: 1) Your answers should be about 30 words each;

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

1) How does the psychologist Derek Parfiat define identity?

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3.3 CULTURAL STRATEGY

Unlike other animals, humans learn most of their behaviors through the process of *enculturation*. Enculturation means that behaviors are learned through social contact, through observation, and by participating in community activities. This type of learning does not need to be expressed verbally, and often is linked with basic, intrinsic understanding of the world and one's place in it. Many, if not most aspects of human behavior can be linked to culturally accepted norms which are generally accepted without question. As discussed in an earlier section, the *habitus* is a term that describes these complex systems of behavior, belief, and modes of social interaction. And when these tacitly accepted systems are violated that they become conscious.

We will first list a number of factors that can constitute identity, and then examine them in the context of several case studies, looking how groups attempt to maintain their autonomy by the preservation of social practices.

3.3.1 Autonomy and agency

In order to understand cultural strategies for the preservation of identity, it is necessary to examine two important terms in depth. The first is autonomy. Autonomy comes from a Greek word which means "one who gives themselves law" from auto (self) and -onomy (rule). Autonomy has meanings, such as identity, on many strata. A region or a province within a state can gain a measure of self-rule, which will then designate that region as an "autonomous region". There are of course varying degrees of political power that are conveyed by this

term in the relationship between smaller entities located within larger political units. Autonomy also refers to an individual's capacity for moral action, for self-regulation and free-will. To be an autonomous individual implies a capacity for self-reflection, self-awareness, and the ability to make reasoned, independent judgments. Autonomy can also refer to 'cultural autonomy' which is the ability of a particular culture to maintain its traditions, especially when confronted with social, economic, or political challenges.

Agency is closely linked with autonomy. It refers to the capacity of an individual to act in the world. Agency implies that a particular actor (individual) has the power to change the external environment through their behaviors. This can be opposed with determinism, external forces which compel behaviors or reaction in various ways. The lack of agency can be seen in a variety of contexts. A prisoner is one who lacks much agency, as they are compelled to follow particular codes of conduct, have their freedom of movement restricted, etc. Another example is a natural disaster, which can be accepted passively as "fate", indicating the lack of agency.

It is crucial to understand that these concepts are culturally dependent. The capacity for autonomy means different things in different contexts. The belief systems of a particular culture will often determine the boundaries, which can be conceptual, social, or even physical, which limit the domain of autonomous action. Likewise, agency is often linked with conceptions of the self, of the individual. Thus, it follows that in the more communal social configurations that we find in tribes, these concepts are manifested far differently than in a business environment, for example. When we look at the cultural strategies for the assertion of identity, they often mean the preservation of cultural traditions and the maintenance of a *collective* autonomy and *collective* agency, not necessarily the individualistic behavioral paradigms found in industrialized systems.

The concept of the 'cultural performance' is important to understand that what is being presented through particular actions may in fact encompass wider cultural elements within it. For example, a particular custom of wearing a piece of jewelry, such as the *mangalsutra* on a bride, has meanings which exist on multiple levels. Let us look briefly at performance studies to understand this more fully.

3.3.2 Performance studies

Performance studies, like ethnomusicology, is a hybrid discipline, drawing on the disciplines of anthropology, linguistics, sociology, theater studies, psychology, and history. Performance studies pose the question: how is any performance effective, that is, how does it achieve its end? A political speech attempts to convince, a shamanic ritual attempts to heal, a salesman attempts to sell a product. Rituals index cultural and social content, including cosmological systems; the medium of performance links cognitive content with social efficacy, a merging of meaning and function. A performance requires both a performer and an audience, although the audience can sometimes be the self.

Other aspects of performance also assert identity, of the performer, the audience, and the larger community. The English philosopher J. L. Austin is one of the progenitors of 'performance theory' through his work with the performative aspects of speech. A performative is a speech utterance that creates its own effect;

the act of speaking is the performance of a specific action. The performative is a “being that represents a doing.” A performative act of speech must create a result for it to be “efficacious”, thus a performative is evaluated by the result it engenders, not for its veracity.

Richard Schechner and Victor Turner were also important in the development of performance studies. Schechner defines performance as a “Ritualized behavior conditioned/permeated by play”, and emphasizes the serious and dangerous aspects of play. Performance, especially ritualized performance, has the ability to re-define and restructure the social order; it can support or destabilize the dominant system, or both (as in the case of anti-structure). Turner feels that performance is fundamentally a type of experience, and sets symbolic categories in a living, fluid relationship, mediated between the performance, the audience, and the cultural system. Performance can be the site of the negotiation and transformation of the self and society.

The anthropologist Milton Singer described performance as comprising both artistic and cultural categories. In his extensive work on modern India, he found that a broad range of cultural practices, which he designated as “cultural performances”, could be viewed as a single phenomenon. A cultural performance includes religious rituals, ceremonies and festivals, and he conceives them as “separable portions of activity thought by the members of a social group to be encapsulations of their culture”.

Groups then, are able to reinforce their identity by taking part in rituals and performances, and the performers themselves, and the audience who all may belong to various sub-groups, can also validate their place in the community and the larger world.

Check your progress 2

Note: 1) Your answers should be about 30 words each;

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

2) Define performance studies.

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3) Define autonomy and agency.

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3.4 CASE STUDIES OF CULTURAL STRATEGIES FOR ASSERTING IDENTITY

We will discuss specific examples of identity reinforcement using cultural strategies in the following paragraphs. Note the different ways and levels that groups and individuals give shape to and assert their identity.

3.4.1 Martial arts as paths to identity

The practice of the martial arts has long been a way for males in a culture to affirm their identity and cultivate a healthy body. Images of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan have permeated theaters everywhere, and many countries have their own variations. One example is that of *kalarippayattu*, an indigenous martial art practiced in Kerala. It emphasizes the spiritual as well as the physical; participants perform the exercises in groups. Participants come from all ethnic and religious backgrounds. It is a unique expression of Keralite history and Malayi identity, and was revived as a reaction against British colonialism. Its goal is aimed more at promoting the spiritual wellbeing of the individual. It seeks to give meaning and promote an identity for the participants through physical exercise and discipline, and both are expressing an aspect of identity.

3.4.2 Tribal identity through music

The Kota are a tribe of about 1500 who live in south India, speak a Dravidian language, and practice their own religion. . Since the beginning of the 20th century, they have been increasingly marginalized, but have made efforts to adjust to changes around them, and still preserve their culture. They used to play special event music for the neighboring villages in exchange for food and money, but do so no longer. Most Kotas are quite poor, but a few have a small measure of economic success. For their continued unity as a people, they sing at funerals and religious ceremonies. Their goal is to maintain tribal unity. Students can learn music through personal lessons and audio cassettes. Their identity as a communal group is bound together with the performance their music. , and they consciously strive to keep their traditions and life ways alive.

3.4.3 Religious ritual and *puja* drumming in a tribal setting

The Jaunsaries live in Hanol, a remote village in the Himalayas, and practice a variant of Hinduism. They perform daily puja ceremonies that are central to the social and spiritual life of the community; ritual drumming is an integral part of the ceremony. During the ceremony, the Bajgis, hereditary musicians, perform a series of talas that bring the spirit of the deity into oracles known as *bakis* or *malis*. Their performance is integral to the ceremony, yet, since they are of a lower caste, they are excluded spatially. Both the Bajgis and Brahmins negotiate their identity through their interactions, one by drumming, and the other by priestly duties. The ritual itself, with priests, performers, and audience can have an effect on all involved. The performance is where they all meet, in a space/time conjunction. Each group maintains its identity through their caste, their role inside the temple, and their role outside.

Check your progress 3

- Note:** 1) Your answers should be about 30 words each;
 2) You may check your answers with the possible answers at the end of the Unit.
- 4) Nationalism is based on an abstract concept of unified identity. What are the advantages and disadvantages for a pluralistic society such as India in promoting specific definition?

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3.5 LET US SUM UP

Identity is vital to all segments of the population, and cultural strategies to maintain it or change it can be found elsewhere is examined closely. The human drive to identify with a group, to have a strong personal self image, is a modern trait to some extent, as earlier groups identified with their community, not with the individual. Cultural strategies to maintain identity include dress, language, clothing, naming, and group exercise. Identity has been defined many ways by many different cultures. Modern psychology contends that most identity is socially constructed and that people have multiple identities. This means that people can shift between various social roles and self-definitions, but are often unaware of this process. We have also seen how autonomy and agency are important for a healthy identity.

3.6 GLOSSARY

- bakis/malis** : Jaunsarie shamans.
- Diachronic** : occurring across time, over a long period, and the study of the development of language and other culture systems.
- enculturation** : the process of learning by doing, seeing, and participating.
- Entrain** : to vibrate in a similar rhythm. In terms of culture, to blend and fit in.
- Heterodox** : beliefs at odds with accepted beliefs and theories.
- Habitus** : an unconscious and ingrained patterning of behavior.
- Modality** : in terms of identity- various modes or types, can also be applied to the different senses.
- Synchronic** : occurring at one time- in the present moment.

3.7 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

- 1) According to the philosopher Derek Parfit, identity is composed of a multiple, sometimes mutually antagonistic, “family of selves,” including the present ‘I’, past and future ‘I’s’, the ancestral self, and many others.
- 2) Performance studies looks at human behavior as a performance. Much as we would watch a movie or a music performance, performance studies looks at how actions occur with both participants and audiences. Performance studies looks at how performances are effective- how they do or do not achieve the desired result.
- 3) Autonomy describes the capacity of an individual to maintain their personal freedom and awareness. It can also be applied to cultures. Agency is the capacity for action in the world. The lack of agency is indicated by an individual being unable to change their environment or act within it.
- 4) A national identity has great advantages for national pride, unity, and strength.

3.8 ACTIVITIES

- 1) How do you identify or describe yourself, on a personal, regional and national level?
- 2) What relationships do you have that reinforce that identity?
- 3) What actions do you do that reinforce your identity?
- 4) What strategies would work to best to reinforce an inclusive and democratic society?
- 5) If you live in a small town, what rituals or performances are unique to your area? Does everyone take part? Why? (ask some people) Do you? Why?
- 6) If you live in a large city, what kinds of rituals or performances take place around you? Are they specific to a particular group? Do you participate? Explain why or why not.
- 7) Name some performances that you see live everyday (not films or tv). Are they cultural in context? Describe.
- 8) Individual tribe members derive great meaning from identify with their group.
- 9) How will modern technology help and hinder their hold on younger people?

3.9 REFERENCE AND FURTHER READINGS

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¹ These include Kumaun, Gharwali, Jaunsaries, Bewari, and Phari.