Chapter 1

Culture, Community and Identity: The Theoretical Matrix

This chapter seeks to explain some of the various facets of the key terms that will be used in the thesis and highlight the particular aspect of the key terms that the thesis intends to follow. The attempt is to delineate the particular strand of interpretation of each term, forge links between the key terms and show the possibility that there can be a theoretically plausible argument to read and recognize cultural identity at the level of members in their capacity as individuals. The key terms are – Culture, Community and Identity.

Culture

The chronological process of evolution of the term culture began in the fifteenth century with culture referring to cultivation, initially of plants and animals and then of human minds. Culture then began to be referred to the general secular process of social development. This strand of thought was common to the Enlightenment view that saw culture as a process of unilinear, historical self-development of humanity which all societies would pass through.¹ Echoing the unilinear development aspect, Jenks views culture as a tool to understood and invoke a state of moral development in society. This is a position linking culture with the idea of civilization. It is informed by the evolutionary thesis of Charles Darwin and informative of that group of social theorists now known as the ‘early evolutionists’. Their competitive views on ‘degeneration’ and ‘progress’ linked the endeavour to 19th century imperialism.²

Conceptually, Culture has been viewed as a cerebral category that carries with it the idea of perfection, a goal or an aspiration of individual human achievement or emancipation. At one level, this might be a reflection of a highly individualist
philosophy and at another level an instance of a philosophical commitment to the
particularity and difference, even the 'choseness' or superiority of humankind. Culture has also been understood as the collective body of arts and intellectual work
within any one society. This view carries along with it senses of particularity, exclusivity, elitism, specialist knowledge and training or socialization. In the pluralist
and potentially democratic sense of the concept it is regarded as the whole way of life
of a people.³

The understanding of the term culture in the plural – 'cultures', proved to be
significant for social and anthropological studies. Culture as a social category deals
with beliefs and social behaviour of individuals. Cultures here referred to the distinct
ways of life, the shared values and meanings common to groups – communities, tribes, nations, classes etc. Culture here is understood as the set of practices by which
meanings are produced and exchanged within a group.⁴ It is this understanding of
culture that the thesis is interested in. However, this conception by itself is too vast
and inclusive. If culture is taken as shared values and meanings that characterize
groups, then a broad spectrum of groups is covered. A Marxist association, an
environmental group, music gharanas, professional cultures (corporate culture, media
culture), regional cultures (Telugu culture, Punjabi culture) institutional cultures
(IIMs, Universities), neighbourhood cultures etc. can all come under the rubric of
such a definition.

The form of culture that the thesis is concerned with is what is called in
multicultural studies, ethno-culture, in other words the kind of culture that is found in
an ethnic group. This leads to the question – What is an ethnic group? As Jackson
states, we cannot point as if to establish an ostensive definition of an ethnic
collectivity – and declare, 'This is an ethnic group'. When we observe ethnic
collectivities we do not see objects as such but object indicators (or recognitors) that are symptomatic of collectivities. At a minimum, an ethnic collectivity consists of persons who share one or more such characteristics and can be said to occupy a common ethnic base (or platform). Ethnic characteristics are not acquired by personal choice but by inheritance or ascription: an involuntary assignment to an identifiable social category, like membership in a family. But ethnicity is not kinship writ large. Members of an ethnic group are related not by ties of blood but by a common shared historical past and a set of evolved social characteristics, beliefs and practices.5

Following Weber, the thesis believes that ethnic membership differs from kinship precisely for being a presumed identity. He goes on to state that ethnic membership does not constitute a group, it only facilitates group formation of any kind, particularly in the political sphere. (Roth and Wittich, 1968:387).6

Ethno-culture is that which evolves rather than deliberately constituted, the shared values and meanings emanate and evolve from a historically shared way of life. It can be in the form of amorphous set of symbols, manifested through rituals, and embodied through practices. It can also refer to food habits, ways of dressing, dialects etc.

The strand of culture that the thesis draws is in the realm of shared values and meanings that are embodied by a group of people across generations. The study seeks to make a case for the autonomy of members in the articulation and expression of cultural meanings. Culture can refer to deep-rooted social practices (the institution of marriage) as well as the religious and customary rituals and ceremonies associated with such practices (the rituals and ceremonies attached to the act of getting married). More often than not the social and the religious don’t just overlap but are inextricably intertwined. The concern with autonomy of members in the expression of culture then
would also include concerns relating to freedom of religion and religious liberties. (Henceforth any reference to culture in the thesis would refer to culture as stated here).

While the pervasive impression is that cultural expression is a group issue that can be apprehended and expressed only at the level of the group, the thesis attempts to explain that there could be an individualist interpretation of culture even as it is understood as a shared way of life. While it agrees with prevailing views that culture evolves from historically shared ways of life of a people, it stresses the point that these *ways of life need not always be shared in one common way* by such people. It is this point that is the central concern of the thesis.

Here it is important to refer to Blum’s categorization and understand the differences between them. Blum distinguishes between three categories as candidates for recognition – (a) the *individual* in light of her distinct cultural identity; (b) cultural, or culturally defined, *groups*; (c) *cultures* themselves. 7 Culture is the context, culturally defined group is the matrix and the site, and individual is the agent who mediates her/his cultural identity in the context provided by culture against the matrix of group. (The group is also an agent of cultural identity with regard to concerns that can be apprehended only at the level of the group as a holistic unit. The focus of the thesis however is on the individual’s cultural identity, not exclusive of the group but distinct from the group).

The theoretical literature on culture can be divided into two broad categories – (a) those that assign an active role to human agency rather than working through an essentialized set of meanings; (b) those that view culture through structures and patterns where the individual is an instrument of expression rather than an agent.
The second category can be viewed in three ways – as a system, as a set of patterns, and as constitutive rules. Each is an indispensable feature of any culture but all are manifested at the level of group as an irreducible unit. Conflating them with the concept of culture severely limits, if not totally decimates, the agency and choice of members. While the thesis acknowledges the presence of structures, rules and patterns and even recognizes their utility as a powerful organizing stimulus, it finds formulations of culture with exclusive focus on culture as a system, as patterns and as constitutive rules at the cost of human agency inadequate and consequently inaccurate.

The theoretical orbit that the thesis is inspired by regarding the term Culture can be traced in modern western theory to its nascent stage in the writings of Max Weber who insisted in locating culture in the course of action that is uniquely human. The concept of Culture for the thesis is also hugely influenced by the writings of Clifford Geertz with his highlight on the interpretive aspect and Anthony P Cohen’s emphasis on social interaction as the transaction of meanings based on interpretation of common symbols.

Following Kant, Weber viewed the individual actor as a free moral agent not appropriately subject to analysis by the generalizing methods of the natural sciences. The epistemological work of Weber and his forbears thus becomes the clarification of the systematic yet socially constructed character of the concepts of cultural science and the grounding of these constructions in the notions of difference and value. His method of cultural analysis proceeded from certain strongly held views on the nature of social enquiry. He asserted that cultural knowledge should be conceptual in character rather than descriptive and an attempt at literal representation and wished to locate cultural facticities within the realm of reason. Beyond this Weber sought to
resist the intrusion of judgments of value into the rigourous practice of his social science; which is not to say that he failed to recognize the infinitely value-laden character of the rejection of values. Culture is the practice of humankind as is its understanding. Finally, he resisted the compelling idea that stemmed from the obvious and apparent success of natural sciences, that social, historical or cultural analysis should aspire to the establishment of laws and empirical generalizations.\footnote{11}

While it was Weber who pioneered the idea of locating cultural facticities within the course of action that is uniquely human with the individual as a free moral agent, it is Geertz who is to be credited for bringing to the fore the significance of interpretation in cultural studies. Clifford Geertz locates the idea of culture firmly within the context of on-going, interpretive action on the parts of both social actor and social theorist. He quite clearly understands culture as a symbolic network which he refers to as the ‘semiotic’ in the following quote –

‘The concept of culture I espouse … is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs. and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical.’\footnote{12}

There are three interrelated and powerful principles contained within Geertz’s precise and eloquent formulation. The first is that culture (‘webs of significance’) is created and continually recreated by people through their social interaction, rather than imposed upon them as a Durkheimian body of social fact. Secondly, being continuously in process, culture has neither deterministic power, nor objectively identifiable referents (‘law’). Third, it is manifest in the capacity with which it endows people to perceive meaning in, or to attach meaning to social behaviour.\footnote{13}
For Geertz, as interworked systems of construable signs (what ignoring provincial usages, he would call symbols) culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviours, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly – that is, thickly – described.  

Anthony P Cohen endorses Geertz’s stand by pointing out that behaviour does not ‘contain’ meaning intrinsically; rather, it is found to be meaningful by an act of interpretation: we ‘make sense’ of what we observe. The sense we make is ‘ours’, and may or may not coincide with that intended by those whose behaviour it was. Thus, in so far as we ‘understand’ the behaviour which goes on around us and in which we participate, we make and act upon interpretations of it: we seek to attach meaning to it. Social interaction is contingent upon such interpretation; it is, essentially, the transaction of meanings.  

From Weber’s, Geertz’s and Cohen’s views the following can be inferred—

Culture is not defined or irreversibly codified through establishment of laws, it is not subject to generalizations (Weber).

Culture is created through social interaction. It does not have deterministic power. It is the capacity to perceive meanings in social behaviour (Geertz).

Behaviour does not contain meaning intrinsically. The meaning of behaviour is dependent on one’s interpretation (Cohen).

The content of cultural phenomena according to this perspective then emerges through human intention; certain sensations or impressions are given to us through the character of our relation to the world. We then place a form upon them by imposing a category of thought or an idea upon them. It is the way of classifying these sensations and imposition of categories that is a source of muddlement. It is
between what culture is and in what ways culture is described as, that the politics of cultural identity is played out.

The categories of classifying culture (systematic rules, taxonomies, paradigms) are to be strictly viewed as instruments that aid in the understanding of such a phenomenon. One has to guard against two tendencies: (1) that in the making of the categories, the categories represent as far as possible the reality of the subjects; (2) in understanding the categories, it is important not to conflate the categories with the phenomenon.

Rules, taxonomies, and paradigms are mere instruments to understand a certain view culture in an objective sense. To understand culture in a holistic manner one has to understand what culture does. Ethno-culture works at two levels – at an ideological level, and at an existential level as the link of the community’s social existence.

Culture as an ideological notion explains the underlying order of things, issues of the meaning of life, the basic nature and purpose of individual members and community, meaning of happiness and self-worth and issues of ethics and morality. Culture as constitutive rules strongly informs this notion of culture. Culture in this view constitutes a body of definitions, premises, statements, postulates, presumptions, propositions, and perceptions about the nature of the universe and man’s place in it. Culture tells the actor how the scene is set and what it all means. It is culture that tells the actor what ghosts, gods, and human beings are and what they are all about.  

Culture in its ideological notion justifies and rationalizes certain selected ways of behaviour. This notion of culture also views it as a pattern of fundamental beliefs and values, defining rules of interaction, setting priorities, expectations and goals. Cultural variables are considered as products of action, as well as conditioning
elements of further action.\textsuperscript{19} This can be inferred as it is a basic part of constitutive rule systems that the entities created have entailments to norms, and norms in turn entail action. (Friedrich 1977).\textsuperscript{20}

The notion of culture as a connection of the community’s social existence not only refers to immediate contiguity, but goes beyond it to the givenness that stems from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language and following particular social practices. One is bound to another member of the cultural community at least in great part by virtue of some unaccountable absolute import attributed to the very tie itself.\textsuperscript{21} The connective role of culture is aided by its manifestation as symbols, structures and practices. All three manifestations are interconnected and aid in the perpetuation of the other two.

Culture as symbols is encapsulated in representations. Sheer physical existence does not endow them with meaning. In order to carry certain meanings, people, animals and objects have to be invested with symbolic significance. Such symbols include words, visual images, and the codes and conventions from which the value systems and patterns of behaviour of particular communities are inferred.\textsuperscript{22} These are expressed in metaphorical as well as concrete terms. Some examples of culture as symbols are, respect given to certain elements of nature or animals because of a symbolic value attached to them (the cow for Hindus, the fire for Parsis) rituals (ceremonies pertaining to the time of birth, marriage or death in any community), rules of discriminating between the pure and the polluted (the caste system in India). Ideals, norms, values, (vegetarianism, non-violence) also have a symbolic component.

Regarding the representational aspect, the thesis believes that since culture is not subject to generalizations and does not have deterministic power, it is possible that a member may invoke a symbol and interpret it in a manner not in conformity
with the prevailing representations. Here, it would be useful to remember that a representation is just a re-presentation, which is mediated through subjective interpretation.

How do members relate to symbols? Members have a locus standi when relating to symbols. The site of location of members is a crucial definer of the members' perspective to the symbols and has a significant influence on the interpretation. This brings to the fore the structural manifestation of culture. It is the structural manifestation of culture that gives a sense of location to its members. As Taylor states, "To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand." It is through the structure that the pattern of interrelations within the cultural community is embodied. It is also indicative of the nature and working of hierarchy within the cultural community. The structural manifestation of culture also provides a grid of social measurements for assessing members in the cultural community. These social measurements and modes of evaluation are not static givens. Again, there is a significant subjective component to it. The structural manifestation is also significant in terms of stratifying and defining boundaries at times in territorial terms, but almost always by establishing psychic and social domains. Culture as structure has a central role in ensuring the equilibrium and internal homeostasis of the overall system.

Culture manifests in the empirical realm through activity or practice. This brings to the fore the behavioural aspects of culture. Behaviour has been identified with the production of external effects by internal causes. It is the one producing the other – a process, not a product. As a process, it carries with it the dynamism of being continually in action. If Culture as a system is located in the course of action that is uniquely human (Weber) and has no deterministic power (Geertz) and is created and continually recreated by people through their social interaction then the
patterns of activity and practice are derived from their creators and users, in other words by human agents with communicative purposes through the process of interpretation.\textsuperscript{28} If culture is seen as a system of norms and values that provide a sense of identity within a bounded whole to the members of the community and endows their lives with a sense of meaning, it is the shaping (indeed articulation) of the significance of such meaning through interaction and interpretation that takes place in community activity and practices.\textsuperscript{29}

The manifestation of culture as symbols, structures and practices have no intrinsic meaning. Meaning is derived and understood through interpretation as a crucial decoding tool. Nothing means simply by virtue of existing. It is interpretation that endows them with meaning. The manifestations of culture then do not so much express meaning as give us the capacity to make meaning.\textsuperscript{30}

Concomitantly, no physical or manifested form holds a final or stable meaning. In fact, its significance will inevitably alter with respect to two aspects – according to the changes undergone by the cultural or social formation of which it is part, and the interpretive tools used. If this applies to concrete entities, it is no less relevant to abstract concepts. Such meanings are at best context-specific meanings, determined with reference to the symbols employed to define them.\textsuperscript{31}

It is important to make a distinction between the message and the meaning. While messages may exist symbolically, it is meaning that gives shape to the message. This has been aptly described by Douglas Hofstadter who discusses the problem of ‘where meaning is’ in the following manner – With respect to culture, this question is usually put in the following form: Where does one look for meaning – in culturally produced messages of various sorts or in the minds of the people who interpret these messages? If variations in the physical forms that make up the
manifest message have the appropriate one-to-one correspondence to the meaning carried by the message, then the cultural analyst need only have the proper intelligence to determine its meaning. But if the meaning is highly compacted and lacks the necessary isomorphism between variations in the physical signal and meanings produced, then the message cannot be deciphered by the cultural analyst without recourse to the latent system already present in the mind of the decoder. As a result of the interaction between what is contained in cultural messages and what is contained in the interpretation system of the mind, as a general rule, one cannot locate cultural meanings in the message. Thus a distinction must be made between message and meaning.32

In what ways are meanings important in the constitution of the cultural identity of the individual? It is meanings that give shape to the contours cultural identity. To the extent the content of meaning depends on interpretive tools, it follows that meaning is dependent on human agency. For interpretation does not take place at the level of an abstract unit. While meanings emerge through interpretation attributed by human agency, once meanings are attributed they inform and even define the identity of members of the cultural community. When meaning is manufactured by the interaction of the group mind with the cultural symbol, even though the interaction is by human agents in the name of the group, it takes on the illusion of having a universal status to be accepted by all those who consider themselves to be a part of the group. However, while symbols can be universal within a certain universe (here cultural community) meanings are contingent on interpretations. Each member has the capacity to interpret by interacting with the message in an individual capacity and could attribute her/his own meaning to each message.33
Meanings are important because once attributed to the symbol/message, they can have a constitutive effect on the identity of the group as a whole as well as each member in an individual capacity.

In what ways do meanings affect identities? How one thinks of meaning depends on what one thinks meanings do. Meanings, in general, and cultural meaning systems in particular, do at least four different things. Meanings represent the world, create cultural entities, direct one to do certain things, and evoke certain feelings. These four functions of meanings – the representational, the constructive, the directive, and the evocative – are differentially elaborated in particular cultural meaning systems but are always present to some degree in any system.³⁴

It is further pointed out that one of the obvious but nevertheless remarkable facts about meaning systems is that interpretation of past messages can change the interpretative system itself, so that new messages are understood differently than they would have been had not the previous message occurred. This makes for a very flexible system. Added to the modifiability of meaning systems is the fact that people can produce messages and meanings that then react on the producer. The result of both these potentialities – modifiability and reflexiveness – is that people can change their own meaning systems – think things through and get things straight (or get themselves into a terrible muddle). However, there seems to be limits on how much self-induced change is possible, perhaps because at some point, for reasons yet unclear, without outside stimulation no new meanings get produced.³⁵

The way community is understood in the thesis, either as a practical entity or as an idea, itself is a symbolic manifestation of culture, the meaning of which varies with its members’ unique orientations to it. What logically follows is that culture manifested as symbols does not impose itself in such a way as to determine that all its
adherents should make the same sense of the world. Rather, it merely gives them the tools to make sense. The reality of cultural membership in the experience of members thus inheres in their relation and identification with a common body of symbols rather than in making sense of the world in the same way through those symbols. Invoking Geertz’s stand that culture is an interpretive science in search of meaning with interpretation implying a substantial degree of subjectivity, members may differ from each other in certain respects, with regard to their interpretation of the same set of symbols.

The stress is two-fold, one on common symbols, and two on meanings, meanings being neither common nor intrinsic to symbols but evolved by members. The emphasis on interpretations, interpretations being subject to dynamic variables, bolsters the inference that while culture refers to shared meanings within groups, they are not necessarily shared in the same way. They are shared to the extent the set of symbols invoked is common to all in the group. They need not be shared in the same way as each member is potentially capable of attributing a distinct interpretation to the same set of symbols.

Community

Community refers to an organized group of people. An organized group is generally characterized by three principal features – shared concerns, boundaries and membership requirements. Community as a group is distinct from other kinds of groups as interest groups, associations etc. There is an element of deliberation in the formation of an association or an interest group. Community as a group comes into being and exists through an evolutionary process and is characterized by a shared historical way of life.
Any collectivity of people that seems to have some kind of enduring social identity, solidarity and boundedness comes to be regarded as 'community'. The term 'community' as an ethno-cultural community has certain common features. They are often regarded as natural groupings based on ties of shared blood, language, history, territory and, above all, culture. In this view, a community is a social entity that endures over time although the individuals that comprise it change as new members are born and the older die. Continuity is ensured by passing down shared traditions, customs, language, and social norms – in short, culture – from generation to generation. Thus, communities are characterized by continuity, cohesion, boundedness and adherence to tradition. Communities and their specific cultures also provide the basis for the identity of members as well as their primary social context. This conceptualization of community is closely linked to the anthropological understanding of culture as the quintessential human attribute. Community in terms of its constituents can be understood as –

(a) Community as prior to its members and as more than the sum of its parts.

(b) Community as a whole that is a sum of its parts.

In a strictly chronological sense, the community is prior to its members. In other words, the community existed before any particular member and would continue to exist beyond any particular member.

Community as more than the sum of its parts – While a group of individuals cannot get together and constitute a community, the identity of the community is not reducible to the sum of the identity of the members who constitute the community. Individuals constitute community only by virtue of being members of the community.
The criterion of membership can be bestowed only by the relation that each individual has with the whole and as a derivation of that is linked to each other. The whole is the community. This view does not intend to juxtapose the community as a single unit against the individuals who constitute it. What it does intend to highlight is that an aggregate of individuals do not form community. Community at an ideational level represents a shared way of life and common set of beliefs. The shared way of life and common set of beliefs though manifested in members, is not the product of members as individuals. The shared way of life and common set of beliefs is the context for the meanings attributed to culture through the historical trajectory of the community. The meanings no doubt have emerged as a result of the interpretation of human agency of the cultural symbols. But such interpretation is valid only when the community as a whole acknowledges the tools used to interpret the symbols as appropriate and recognizes the interpretation as a viable interpretation. The community merely as a sum of its parts would just end up being an aggregate of individuals.

(b) Community as a whole that is a sum of its parts.

The idea of 'community' per se is an abstract concept. A community in the concrete and objective realm is manifested only through the presence of its members. It is the members as parts of the community that enable the constitution of the concept of community in a concrete sense. Without members to live the community life, the abstract idea of the community remains an empty receptacle. Therefore, one cannot endorse the idea exclusively that the community as a whole is more than the sum of its parts since groups have no moral worth (value) independent of the individuals who compose them.37
The conception of community that the thesis makes a case for is that community as a group is neither exclusively prior to the sum of its parts, nor is it a group that is reducible to being a sum of its parts. According to ontological individualism, any group (here community) is thought to be an aggregate of individuals who possess distinctively human attributes prior to their relations with other individuals. However, at least some attributes of individuals already presuppose the presence of social relations, and in particular of the community to which those individuals belong. Also, to see a group (cultural community) as an aggregate is to get the ontology of groups completely wrong. Groups are neither aggregates, nor sets of individuals, but distinct wholes as individuals as their parts. Unlike aggregates, wholes are extremely sensitive to relations between their parts. Wholes tolerate identity preserving changes. The thesis intends to move beyond the understanding of community through the relation between the group and its parts. It seeks to bring to the fore the importance of role played by human agency rather than highlighting parts as merely ideational or organizational units that constitute a whole.

The distinguishing idea of a cultural community then vis-à-vis any group of individuals is the understanding of cultural community as a whole. Community as a whole refers to a complete unit that derives its identity from its completeness, unlike an aggregate or cluster. An indispensable feature of such a whole is the idea of integrity that pervades a whole. Depending on the fuzziness of the boundaries of the system it is applied to, the concept of integration may yield vague referents with a diversity of meanings. Integration refers to the property of relations among the components of a whole. The concept of integration connotes ‘connectedness,’ ‘relatedness,’ and ‘cohesion.’ The concept of integration also raises the issue of causality. If two or more things are integrated, then they are at the very least causally
linked; that is, a change in one of the things will lead to change in another. In other words, things are 'related' such that a change in one component leads to changes in others. Integration can refer to both a static state and to a process. Also, to know the state of something at one point in time does not necessarily say anything about past and future states. This is a source of conceptual confusion, for what must be known to define a state of a system is different from that to define a system process. The first requires a language of measurement, the latter theory of change. The extent of integration can be gauged through three aspects – strength, inclusiveness, and extensiveness.\textsuperscript{39}

Any construction of community will be an interplay of three underlying dimensions in varying degrees of emphasis: an objective foundation in its existential reality; a subjective construction of this in terms of meanings and values, sentiments and motivation; and a contextual recognition of this by various constituencies in the social matrix in which the community exists.\textsuperscript{40}

Community understood in terms of an objective foundation in existential reality is community as structure. This view can be understood using A R Radcliffe-Brown’s analogy between social life and organic life. The system of relations by which these units are related is the organic structure. As the term is here used, the organism is not itself the structure, it is a collection of units arranged in a structure. It is through and by the continuity of the functioning that the continuity of the structure is preserved. To turn from organic life to social life, if we examine such a community as an African or Australian tribe, we can recognize the existence of a social structure. Individual human beings, the essential units in this instance, are connected by a definite set of social relations into an integrated whole. The continuity of the social structure, like that of an organic structure is not destroyed by changes in the units.
The continuity is maintained by the process of social life, which consists of the activities and interactions of individual human beings and organized group into which they are united. The social life of a community is here defined as the functioning of the social structure.\textsuperscript{41}

It is the understanding of community as a subjective construction in terms of meanings and values, sentiments and motivation that is significant for the thesis. As a subjective construction in terms of meanings and values, the concept of community changes with the change of permutation and additions to the pool of meanings. Meanings as discussed above emerge through the interaction of the mind with the cultural symbol and the interpretation of the interaction.

The identity of a cultural community is through the meanings it produces, acknowledges and in the process validates. Meanings are produced through the interpretation of symbols. The community in this sense exists within the interpretations. As interpretations vary with time, and perspective of the interpreter, the identity of the community also varies. If this account of community is true, then a politics of interpretation (Who may interpret? Who is a member? According to what criteria is interpretation done? Which interpretations are authoritative?) is essentially linked to the identity of every community.\textsuperscript{42}

It is also the community that gives the individual the status of a member by virtue of which the individual is capable of attributing meanings through interpretations. It is also the subjective construction of community that facilitates a link between the generations of members. This is a significant link since the way in which new interpretations are read depends on the older interpretations. It is against the subjective background of the concept of community that new messages can be understood against the background of past messages.
The third dimension influencing the construction of community is contextual recognition. It is the nature of recognition that shapes cultural identity of the community and its members. Recognition to the community by others (external recognition) as well as recognition by the community of its members (internal recognition) is crucially tied to membership criteria. As the primary context of socialization, it is through community that members acquire a 'social profile'. It is vis-à-vis the social profile that the member is viewed both within and outside the community. As recognition by others is a significant ingredient in the constitution of identity, social profile affects cultural identity of the members in a crucial manner.

Membership in cultural communities is generally regarded as a given, as something that one is born with, notwithstanding conversion. But it is through the act of recognition by the community acknowledged by the state that members can benefit from the sense of belongingness. Indeed, communities seem to base their case for recognition on the right to acknowledge, exclude and admit members.

Yet another component of recognition is the recognition of the community by the members. Members recognize community by acknowledging the authority of the community. This is usually expressed through commitment of the members. The word authority comes from the Latin word augere which means 'to make grow' or 'to produce.' This feature has a two-pronged interpretation to it. It is associated with notions of authority and authoritarian behaviour as well as the concept of authorship. The more commonly understood meaning of authority is the first one as legitimate command over members. Invoking the notion of authorship, members as authors of meanings have a part of authority vested in them as members in an individual capacity. This is because as discussed earlier culture has no intrinsic meaning. Meanings are derived from its creators and users, in other words members. As each
member can attribute a distinct meaning through the tool of interpretation to culture, it is members who are authors of meanings. It is as authors that members authorize the community to project these meanings to seek recognition from other members and the State.

Members can recognize the community by being committed to it. Being committed exhibits the desire to be a part of the shared inheritance. Being committed is different from merely supporting a culture. For as Benn points out, mutual support, sympathy and understanding flow from all those who value the common enterprise of cultural community. Even an outsider might do that. But when members are committed to a culture, they not merely support and understand it; they are defined by it and invest their personalities in the same venture.43

Contextual recognition refers to recognition of changes that take place in the pool of meanings. Meanings that are attributed by members are drawn from the members' experiences not just within the community but also from the spatial and temporal spheres that the member as individual inhabits. The meaning attributed by the member is influenced as well as carries the expectations of the member's membership of the state (as a citizen) of other kinds of communities and associations (other than the cultural community that one is born in) and the temporal frame that the member inhabits.

Identity

As Calhoun observes. No other term other than identity captures the subjectively experienced consciousness of oneself which emerges from the interplay of organism, social structure, and cultural reality definitions models that are a central feature of most conceptions of identity.44 The content of identity is inherent in objects but its
form of presentation depends on relational assessment (in relation to a grid of social measurements) and validation through recognition.

It is identity that turns on the interrelated problems of self-recognition and recognition by others. Recognition is vital to any reflexivity – any capacity to look at oneself, to choose one's actions and see their consequences, and to hope to make oneself something more or better than one is. This component of recognition may be the aspect of identity made most problematic by the social changes of modernity.45

Modern concerns with identity stem also from ways in which modernity has made identity distinctively problematic. It is not simply – or even clearly the case – that it matters more to us than to our forebears to be who we are. Rather, it is much harder for us to establish who we are and maintain this own identity satisfactorily in our lives and in the recognition of others. Calhoun further states that modernity has meant in significant part the breakup – or the reduction to near-irrelevance – of most all-encompassing identity-schemes. Kinship still matters to us as individuals; we invest it with great emotional weight, but kinship no longer offers us an overall template of social and personal identities.46

What is being sought in the thesis is a theoretical stance that is capable of linking 'culture' and 'agency' of members in an individual capacity by making parts integral features of the whole and people as crucial to the role played by parts. While the issue of differentiation between parts and whole is well recognized in political and social theory, much attention has not been given to the difference between the 'parts' (organizational and ideational) and the 'people', who inhabit the parts. As Archer states, 'Parts' and 'people' are not coexistent through time and therefore any approach which amalgamates them wrongly foregoes the possibility of examining the interplay between them over time.47
The term ‘identity’ has two dynamic though not necessarily diametrically opposite connotations. At an etymological level, ‘identity’ can be traced and explained as that aspect with which one identifies. The other connotation of ‘identity’ is distinctiveness. As Taylor points out, there is no simple sameness unmarked by difference, but likewise no distinction not dependent on some background of common recognition. Identity is the only term that captures the myriad, distinct nuances across realms of difference and commonality. 48

As Calhoun points out, to see identities only as reflections of ‘objective’ social positions or circumstances ... does not make sense of the dynamic potential implicit ... in the tensions between persons and among the contending cultural discourses that locate persons. Identities are often personal and political projects in which we participate, empowered to greater or lesser extents by resources of experience and ability, culture and social organization. But the puzzles lie not just in invocations of strong collective identity claims. They lie also in the extent to which people are not moved by any strong claims of identity – or communality – with others and respond instead to individualistic appeals to self-realization. These two are not altogether mutually exclusive in practice. 49

Since identity involves identifying with something, it has to be in a certain given context. The Latin root of the term context is contexere, which means ‘to weave together’. A similar sense is given by the Oxford English Dictionary which refers to context as ‘the connected whole that gives coherence to its parts’. However, context cannot be reduced to that which surrounds. Also, one has to be wary of mistaking context with causes. A mere causal view would foreclose an understanding of an agent’s intentions insofar as it might conflate a directional ‘because’ with a conditional ‘because’. 50 It is, rather, a qualitative relation between a minimum of two
analytical entities ... which are two moments in a single process. The boundaries between ‘task and its context’ (task of identifying) are not clear-cut and static but ambiguous and dynamic. As a general rule, that which is taken as object and that which is taken as that-which-surrounds-the-object are constituted by the very act of naming them. An ‘act in its context’ understood in terms of the weaving metaphor requires a relational interpretation of mind; objects and contexts arise together as part of a single bio-social-cultural process of development.\(^{51}\)

Differences of context may also stem from the internal cultural construction of meaning. Such differences arise in language, in schemes of identification and valuation, and in orientations to social practice. They bear on the fact that understanding human beings is not just a matter of interpreting their action, but also of understanding the ways in which their own interpretations and constructions of meaning shaped their action.\(^{52}\)

The other connotation of ‘identity’ – distinctiveness, refers to the individualistic aspect in human agency. Identity is that which is individualistic, unique and distinct. This connotation does not in the least exclude or undermine the element of context but places a stronger emphasis on the agent’s autonomy, will and deliberative capacities. It does not go to the extreme of creating the context, but does stress on the autonomous mode of identification within the context.

The connotations of identification and distinctness of identity can be thought of as involving a representational and referential component and a procedural and ‘skills’ component. One identifies with a certain representation while referring to it, and evolves in a distinct manner in the process of relating to the representation.

The identity of member as an agent of culture within the community in her/his individual capacity involves both the referential as well as the skills component. To
understand the mediation of cultural identity of the member in an individual capacity in the context of cultural community necessitates the understanding of the member as a 'self'. But how does the actor constitute its own self? For some sociologists, reflection of the subject upon itself leads it to seek a principle of order and control over the prevailing disorder and arbitrariness. For others, the subject can assert itself only by referring to common values, a general interest.\textsuperscript{53} Liberals are identified with the first view, while the second view is generally identified with the communitarians.

The Liberal school is characterized by a certain kind of individualism and egalitarianism. For Liberals like Rawls, individuals are 'self-originating sources of valid claims'. Individuals are viewed as the ultimate units of moral worth, as having moral standing as ends in themselves. The community, unlike the individual, is not a 'self-originating source of valid claims'. The egalitarianism that characterizes the Liberal school stresses on every individual having equal moral status. As Dworkin states, every individual is to be treated with equal concern and respect. It is not that community is unimportant to the liberal, but it is important for what it contributes to the lives of individuals.

The Communitarian school emphasizes the importance of cultural membership in providing our sense of self. Cultural rights are justified for communitarians when people of the community share an identification with a 'form of life'. Identification with a form of life is an identification that is recognized or found, not chosen or created. Communitarians believe that forms of life should be considered as defined by shared projects and ends and conceptions of the good.\textsuperscript{57}

How does one understand and locate the member as self without collapsing the concept to an unencumbered, atomistic self or a self constituted entirely by the community without any agency? As Smith Brewster states, 'Selfhood involves being
self-aware or reflective; ... somehow taking into account the boundaries of selfhood at birth and death and feeling a continuity of identity in between; placing oneself in a generational sequence and network of other connected selves as forbears and descendants and relatives; being in partial communication and communion with other contemporary selves while experiencing an irreducible separateness of experience and identity; engaging in joint and individual enterprises in the world with some degree of forethought and afterthought (not just ‘behaving’); guiding what one does and appraising what one has done at least partly through reflection on one’s performance; feeling responsible, at least sometimes, for one’s actions and holding others responsible for theirs.  

How does the mediation of identity of the self involve a procedural aspect? An important attribute of the personal identity model concerns the manner in which an individual may ‘grow into it’, in other words, the process by which such an identity is acquired and fulfilled. This links the models of identity to the domain of personal experience. It has implications both for the modes of becoming socialized to the point of being able to enact the identity model and for the manner in which authenticity demands are both subjectively experienced and socially assessed.

The question then arises, how does socialization enable one to enact the cultural identity model in terms of acquiring it and fulfilling it? In other words, how does socialization in a certain culture give the agent an identity framework that the agent has to fulfill? To answer this question it is necessary to understand the role of culture as a powerful organizing stimulus. Culture plays a crucial role in labeling and stereotyping interpersonal perceptions.

Stereotypes are generalizations about social groups – characteristics that are attributed to all members of a given group, without regard to variations that exist
among members of that group. The term ‘stereotype’ viewed in a non-pejorative manner does have a functional aspect in processing information about the social environment to facilitate effective social interaction. One just has to be careful in applying the right strand of stereotype to facilitate the right kind of processing of social environment without trading off the unique traits of the units that comprise the environment.

There are three different sets in stereotyping. The first set is that of identifying characteristics – features by which a person’s group membership is determined. This set is mostly factual and therefore relatively non-controversial. Many do not even consider identifying characteristics as stereotypes. Examples of this may be a person’s name giving a clue to the region the person is native of. The second set is of defining attributes. This set defines the shared characteristic of its members and in the process defines the parameters of their membership in a group. For example, a member of the Parsi community would be defined in terms of a particular faith and certain religious and customary practices. Conversely, it may lead to a situation where a member may not be identified as a Parsi if her/his orientation and understanding of the community’s symbols or practices do not conform to the definition in the stereotype. The third and most problematic set is that of ascribed attributes – the psychological characteristics that are attributed to the members of a particular group. The controversial nature of stereotypes relate most directly to the ascribed attributes. For example, Muslims who believe in the madrassa mode of education are conservative fanatics and who are hostile to science and technology is an ascribed attribute.

If stereotypes allow us to reduce cognitive complexity to simple terms, and to convey our perceptions in shorthand fashion, then it is also true that stereotypes tend
to rob both perceiver and ‘victim’ of a sense of underlying individuality. Instead of understanding other people as highly complex and differentiated individuals, the perceiver trades nuance for simplicity. And sadly, the object of stereotypic judgments is deprived of individuality, and is instead rendered a pigeon-holed occupant of some set of pre-conceived notions.62

This has two clear effects. One, reading off probable traits of individual members from such stereotype definitions and ascriptions saddles the member with a sense of individuality with an identity she/he does not identify with. Two, such members are deprived of their distinct identity. In terms of cultural identity, it amounts to identifying all members of the community through the dominant defining attributes and ascribing them with traits that they do not identify it. The flip side is that the self is made to face an either/or choice between being a part of the cultural community (and in the process upholding the ‘defining’ and ‘ascribing’ attributes held by the dominant sections) or being expelled from the cultural community. (A kinder situation may pose the choice between being a part of the community or denouncing membership). Either way it amounts to denial of the agency of the self. This brings to the fore the involuntary aspect of membership of the self. If, for such a self the community is the point of reference of belongingness, the option of moving out of the community, if at all it exists, leads to a sense of alienation and anomie. Such involuntary membership without the sense of belonging ironically leads to alienation within the community. The skills component of identity involves walking the thin line of maintaining a sense of belonging with the community, with the sense of belonging being in sync with the member’s perception of one’s self as an individual. However, the individualistic and distinct attribute of the identity of members cannot be attained at the cost of their collective identity as it is the
collective component of identity that bestows on them the qualification of being a member.

At this point, it is important to recall the distinction between culture and cultural identity. Culture is the cognitive category that is inclusive of the realm of the produced and sedimented symbolic. Cultural identity is the form of presentation that culture acquires vis-à-vis a culturally defined group. While cultural identity retains its distinctiveness over a period of time, this ‘distinctiveness’ is never ‘the same’ for long. It lasts through change. Moreover, there is no ‘now’ in culture, not in the sense postulated by the precept of synchrony, in the sense of a point in time cut from its own past and self-sustained when its openings into the future are ignored. As Castoriadis observes, the durability of identity consists in the preservation of its distinctiveness; but that the latter is inconceivable outside or independently of its duration, which brings together successive – different – forms of distinctiveness as belonging to the same identity.

With such a perception of cultural identity, to understand a culture is to understand a matrix of possible permutations, a set never fully implemented and always far from completion – not a finite collection of significations and the art to recognize their carriers. What collects cultural phenomena into a ‘culture’ is the presence of such a matrix, a constant invitation to change, not their ‘systemness’ – that is, not the mixture of petrification of some (‘normal’) choices and elimination of some other (‘deviant’) ones.

How is cultural identity to be understood at the level of the member in an individual capacity? As mentioned earlier in the chapter, cultural identity at the level of members in an individual capacity is attribution of meanings by the members and recognition of the same by the cultural community and the state. It could be stated
that if members derive their sense of self only from the community then the meanings attributed by them need not be distinct from meanings projected by the community as an irreducible unit. This however is not the case as a member’s attribution of meaning is derived not just from the community but also from several competing selves living in several spheres of contemporary times, choosing and revising their cultural understanding from the orientation that emerges from the permutation of the various competing selves in each member. Such meanings may or may not be a part of the existing pool of meanings and may or may not conform to the meaning as projected by the dominant voices of the community. The thrust of the thesis is to highlight the need to recognize even those meanings as valid interpretations that do not conform to the dominant interpretations. The existing pool of meanings mediated by earlier members serve as a historical legacy. They provide the context with which the members identify. However, to regard conformity with the existing pool of meanings, or with the dominant interpretations as the criterion to recognize cultural identity would be unfair to those whose meanings do not conform to either of these.

Summing up, what is the necessity to invoke cultural identity at the level of individual members? An important feature of cultural identity is a shared, evolved inheritance. Shared inheritance refers to two things. One, the common symbols of the cultural community. Two, it refers to the already accumulated pool of meanings over the historical passage of the community. Both these aspects of shared inheritance – common symbols and accumulated pool of meanings – constitute the context of choice for the cultural identity of the self. Here, it will be helpful to recall the two faces of identity – identification and distinctness. The context of shared inheritance and the accumulated pool of meanings enables the self to identify and thereby exercise the identification aspect. The distinctness aspect is brought into play by
exercising agency of the self and providing scope to contributing new meanings to the existing pool. If not by attributing new meanings, the procedural and skills aspect can be exercised at the very least by choosing the meanings one wants to associate with in an aware and informed manner instead of blindly following the dominant interpretation. What is being resisted is being constituted by meanings as a passive subject.

Recognizing cultural identity at the level of members in their capacity as individuals is necessary for the community as well. To survive, a community needs to be relevant to the present and shape its contours with regard to the context. A community to survive depends on the commitment and loyalty of its members. The members can be truly committed only when they have a sense of belonging within the community. This is possible only when the member’s role as unit of meaning generation is acknowledged. Apart from strengthening the member’s sense of belonging, it also facilitates the community to flourish with the members as units of regeneration.

What is the effect of non-recognition of cultural identity at the level of an individual member? In spite of being a part of a cultural community, such a member cannot enjoy the benefits of belongingness as she/he is unable to identify with the cultural identity imposed on her/him. Such a member ends up confronting the very ills of anomie and unencumberedness to avoid which membership in the cultural community is sought and prized.

Also, identity constitutes the form of presentation of the actor not only to oneself but also in external relationships both within and outside the community. In other words, it has a strong impact on the social profile of members as a part of the community as well as in an individual capacity. What this points to is that the
personality of the self is in a crucial sense socially defined, so that one ‘reads oneself’ – literally, learns about oneself – in the faces, gestures and words of others. It is from others that one learns that one is possessed of a particular intensity and purpose. Others perceive through the defining and ascribing attributes recognized by the community. When the ‘self-perception’ and ‘perception by others’ aspects of cultural identity of the individual member are not in harmony, it adversely affects the integrity between the notion of self and the ideas of social profile and social inheritance.

Conflicts arise in the mediation of cultural identity of individual members when the same parameters of recognition are used for the self as well as the cultural community as an irreducible unit. To contain if not prevent conflict, recognition accorded to the cultural community should imply recognition of the symbols (representational systems) and structure (order). Recognition of the identity of the member in an individual capacity, in light of her/his cultural distinctness, should be recognition of the self’s capacity and autonomy to interpret and make meaning of the symbols in the given context, the orientation of the member in the structure and the member’s ways of living out meanings through activity and practices.

The issue may be raised that if every unique orientation should be accommodated within the community and each be accorded recognition for their distinct cultural perspective, the boundary of the cultural community may be perceived in rather diverse ways even by people on the same side. Hence, it is fully possible that boundaries perceived by some may be utterly imperceptible to others. The question then arises that if boundary markers are so fuzzy, how can the distinct identity of the cultural community be maintained? A possible reply could be that the variability in subjective interpretation over boundary markers has always existed over the historical evolution of almost every cultural community. Also, even within the
variable pool of distinct ways of interpreting cultural identity by the members, there is a tendency towards a certain cohesion and perhaps solidarity that may be instrumental in erecting certain conformity standards which again can take on a tendency to be read as markers of permissible boundaries. The question is how is one to identify the nature and extent of deviancy in behaviour to invoke the boundaries of the community?

Here, it is necessary to distinguish between two kinds of deviant behaviour – (1) violations of the group’s behavioural norms and (2) violations of group’s membership boundaries.

If behaviour is viewed as the production of external effect by internal causes, then deviance in behaviour arises due to dissonance between self-perception of cultural identity and perception by others. Such behaviour need not amount to rejection of cultural identity. It may just be a manifestation of yet another unique orientation and interpretation that needs to be accommodated within the community in all its distinctness. The boundaries of the community are maintained by salient symbols that represent group membership. As long as the community’s membership boundaries are not violated (which a member with ‘deviant behaviour’ but striving to maintain the sense of belonging would not violate) the distinct identity of the community in spite of its fuzzy boundaries is not at stake.

The next chapter examines the concept of cultural identity through the language of rights, specifically group rights. Cultural identity is a significant component in the identity of each member in an individual capacity. The sense of dignity, self-esteem and the development of the personality of the member is crucially dependent on and shaped by the nature of recognition accorded to cultural identity at the level of members in an individual capacity. Such recognition cannot be accorded
by decimating the group component of cultural identity or reducing cultural identity to an individual good. The thesis explores the concept of group right not just to make a case to protect cultural identity at the level of the community as a whole but also for entitling members to the right to cultural identity to members in an individual capacity.
END NOTES


(47) Culture and Agency – Archer (check)


(58) Brewster, Smith.


