

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives
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Week-01
Lecture-02

Anthropology: An Introduction

Welcome back to the class. We are continuing with the introductory remarks on these two disciplines that is sociology and anthropology. And as you recollect in the previous class, we had a very brief discussion about the discipline sociology and looking into its origin, its historical trajectory, the kind of major people who contributed to its development, the important theories and methodologies that are used in this particular discipline. And today we are moving to anthropology, an elite subject, a very, very, very, very close subject. And why we are, I mentioned in the previous class why we are spending this into. Yeah, so we are looking into anthropology because anthropology is a very, an allied subject to sociology.

In many places, including India, we usually do not make a kind of a very hard distinction between sociology and anthropology, whereas in many other places, there is a distinction, the methodologies are different, the orientations are different, we will discuss that in later. But when it comes to the question of Indian society, as we know, Indian society was studied by both sociologists and anthropologists, and it would be very difficult to label somebody as exclusively as sociologists, because many times they would have used both the theoretical as well as methodological orientations of anthropology. So, in this class, I am giving a very broad, very brief overview of the discipline only to familiarize you with the discipline, especially for those who are not kind of familiar with this particular discipline. Now, let us begin by looking into the origin and development of anthropology.

Again, it has an older history, but the late 18th century as a defining starting point, as in the case of sociology, the inquisitiveness about human beings, the inquisitiveness, the desire to know more about human beings, especially different kind of human beings, people who live differently, people who look differently, people who are coming from other places, people who are speaking a different language, people who follow different customs, all these things have evoked curiosity among the mind of human beings. And if you read the, you know, the travelogues of the great, you know, travelers, you will see how they described different people, how they are kind of taken aback by some of the customs and rituals, how they describe the lifestyles, the dress styles and then various

habits of these people with quite a lot of enthusiasm. So ever since human beings maybe began their civilization or began to lead a kind of a more sophisticated life, this urge to understand other emerged. But again, as in the case of sociology, this took a more specific, more institutionalized, established form in the late 18th century. So especially again in Europe, where we also say that sociology was also, you know, originated in Europe in a systematic manner, there was an interest in the antiquities across Europe due to the archaeological excavations.

And by then, by late 18th century, most of the European countries, at least the most important European countries had established, you know, had into the process of colonization and they had established colonies in many places. And at the same time within Europe itself, there was a kind of a renewed interest in understanding the antiquities, what kind of a curiosity to understand the past of the Europe because of a host of archaeological excavations. And there was an interest in European customs and folklore related with the nationalism question. Again, you know, Europe was, had a very, very interesting history about how various nationalisms, the French nationalism, the English nationalism and different nationalisms, we fought over centuries. So, there was a renewed interest in redefining their nationalism on the basis of their cultural legacy, their heritage and their past, looking into their customs and folklore.

So, all these things provide again a kind of a fill up to understand, to look back into their cultural legacy, into the lives and lifestyles of their own people. And also, a host of other new developments, which especially the kind of advancements that happened in the field of science, the Darwinian intervention and the rejection of a biblical time and creationism. Again, I do not think I need to kind of elaborate it much further, the intervention of Charles Darwin and the argument about creationism, the argument about evolutionism, that human beings evolved over a period of time, and they are not created by God. So, that argument came as a huge, you know, rebuttal to the, to the theories so far, peddled by the church and the clergy. So, there was an outright rejection, or not may not be outright, but there was a very substantial rejection of the, of creationism, at least among an increasing section of population and a kind of a rejection of a biblical time.

So, by then scientific enquiries and scientific excavations and scientific discoveries have provided with a kind of an alternative understanding about the evolution of the universe, evolution of the earth, evolution of life and evolution of human beings. So, that again, a kind of further triggered lot of interest in the antiquities of human beings. How did we live? How did we evolve? What was the life say, some five centuries ago? What was the life, how did the life look like? What were the customs? How did people live? What kind of languages they spoke? What was their kind of various customs and rituals? So, a host of questions came to the centre stage when you look into human society as a product

of human evolution. And also, the colonial expansion, as I just mentioned, that the Europe began to set out to move to different parts of the globe, into Latin America, into Canada, into the US, into the Africa, into the Asian countries, and where they encountered completely new, alien and often primitive people. This 'primitive' in inverted comma is important because this is the term that is, that was widely used to justify this particular discipline called anthropology.

Anthropology in its initial periods was defined as the study of the primitive people. This distinction or this binary was very, very clear. The Europe was seen as modern and the non-Europe, especially the colonies were seen as the underdeveloped and that of the primitives. So, most of the colonies, according to the colonizers were inhabited by primitive people. Maybe an exception could be that of India where they could see the evidences of a great civilization.

But in many places, especially in Africa, African societies, African people or in a number of other places in Latin America, people were branded as primitive, irrespective of their cultural resources or cultural or the kind of wealth, cultural, the richness of their culture, they were branded as primitive. And this became an important people because they began to see completely different set of people, people with different histories, people with different religious beliefs, people with different food habits, you know everything, everything was different. That is why this term alien is something important. And that again, kindled their, rekindled their passion to understand people more. So, to understand the primitive past of Europeans through the understanding of the living primitives elsewhere.

So, this is another very interesting argument because by then this whole argument about an evolutionary process had attained prominence. It was believed that the Europeans occupy the most advanced position and because they have passed through this process of evolution and quite a lot of other people are say somewhere here or somewhere here or they are somewhere here, but they will take long time to reach here whereas the Europe has already reached there. So, they really wanted to know how their previous society looked like, how they looked like in some couple of centuries ago by looking into the living primitive people that you come across in Africa for example. Again, African people were quite often seen as the living embodiments of the early human beings given their colour, given their stature, given their nature it was argued that they could be seen as the people of the early times. So, these ideas, these ideas especially heavily influenced by kind of a scientific racism again influenced the emergence of anthropology.

Now let me spend some time, we will do it in more detail, but let me spend some time elaborating this point further, the connection between colonialism and anthropology

because it is an extremely important point. This is important both in case of sociology and colonialism, but more important, more fundamental with respect to the relation between colonialism and anthropology. And in the next week as well, I think we will come back to this particular topic because you cannot discuss the emergence of anthropology or sociology in India without discussing its colonial past and colonial connections. So, colonialism enabled the institutionalization, professionalization, and expansion of anthropology in colonies across the world. And again, India is a classic case, but this has happened across the place.

So anthropology as a discipline did not emerge independent of the colonial enterprise. This is an extremely important point. If you look into anthropology as a scientific discipline, as a branch of science, as a branch of knowledge system, it did not develop independent of the state enterprise and no discipline for that matter kind of develops in that sense. But here the way in which anthropology was instrumentally used by colonial state is something very important. That is the whole crux of the point.

Anthropology as a discipline, anthropologists as professionals were incorporated into the colonial project. And this incorporation had various objectives. It had objective of knowing more about the native population, collecting more information, understanding them scientifically, but all of them led to a kind of a more important fundamental or even sinister objective of governing them more efficiently or exploiting them more efficiently. That is why the colonial baggage of anthropology is something so, so enormous that the discipline could not really get rid of that. And we will come back to this point later.

There was a lot of self-reflection, critical reflection among anthropologists about the kind of a connection between colonialism and anthropology. But across the place, the institutionalization of anthropology, setting up of anthropological institutes, setting up of anthropological departments in university, then field works, collection of data, all these things led to the creation of a huge amount of knowledge about native population that was systematically used and even misused by the colonial enterprise. And many anthropologists were directly funded by colonial governments to carry out studies on its subjects. We will again come back to this point. Again, India is a classic case.

We had the first systematic understanding about Indian people were done by the colonialists. The systematic census happened here. The systematic survey of Indian languages, Indian people, their customs, all these things of course had an academic value. They are very, very valuable in terms of its academic contribution, but its connection with the colonial enterprise is something so important because they use this information to systematically exploit Indian resources, to understand Indian and thereby govern it more effectively, govern it more effectively and with complete control. So, the discipline

actively participated in framing policies on governance and interference in the local culture and tradition.

So this is yet another very fascinating area. If you look into the colonial policy, especially in India, the initial policy was a kind of a known interference. They came here, especially the British came here solely for the purpose of trade. They came through East India Company, but later the whole administration was taken over by the British queen and by the British Empire. Then they had a kind of a difficult decision to make, to what extent they should interfere in the internal matter of the society.

And any such discussions, any such decision kind of requires a more comprehensive understanding about what they are getting into, what kind of intervention and what are its possible consequences. And a series of colonial interventions in India, whether in the economic realm or in the cultural realm or in the religious sphere, kind of has, they had the potential of creating so much of trouble for the colonial enterprise. Whether it is about banning sati or intervention in various other social, so-called social evils. All these things really required more clearer understanding about how India's society and culture really functioned. That again, it takes us to a fundamental discussion about the kind of a connection between power and knowledge production debate.

We will discuss that in detail, so I am not going into that, but it is a very fascinating set of arguments about how knowledge production is inextricably connected with power, power of various kinds. So, knowledge never gets produced in isolation. There is no knowledge that is produced in a kind of very isolated environment. No scholar functions in isolation. No scholar produces very objective analysis or objective knowledge.

They are all influenced and then affected by various forms of power relation. And we will, this is a central theme of our course itself. We will discuss over in detail; we will discuss a host of other things. But this will remain, or this will be one of the most fundamental themes of this course, Indian society sociological perspectives because this is a very, very fascinating argument. Now anthropology has two broad divisions.

There are various other subdivisions, but these are the kind of widely accepted two broad divisions. One is social or cultural or and cultural anthropology and second one is physical or biological anthropology. The first one deals with the social and cultural dimensions. The latter deal deals with the questions of human evolution and racial difference. So, kind of two broad divisions, one looking into the cultural and social dimensions.

For example, the kind of kinship patterns, the kind of political systems, the kind of

social arrangement, the kind of hierarchy, the kind of religiosity, the kind of cultural habits. All these things can be clubbed under the first category that is looking into the social and cultural anthropology. You have a host of anthropological works which really looked into this particular aspect, the sexual life of certain tribal people, the religious life of certain people, social initiation ceremonies of certain people, the religious systems of people. So, all these things become a part of what you understand it as the social or cultural anthropology. And the second part is the physical or biological anthropology.

The second division, so the second broad division that is a physical or biological anthropology looks into kind of a, is more concerned with the question of evolution. Evolution and the physical dimensions of human beings. And especially evolution is an important subject matter of anthropology, physical anthropology which looks into the various species and various forms of human evolution, the various kinds of human subspecies that existed before that and they deal with the excavation and then examination of human skeletons and other evidences. But more importantly or especially during say at least till 1950s, another major thrust of biological anthropology or physical anthropology was looking into the question of race because there was a time of scientific racism. They believed that scientifically people can be divided into some 6 or 7 major groups and on the basis of physical features they could divide people into these 6 or 7 important groups.

So that became very important and very powerful during 40s and 60s and on the basis of a series of bodily features like say the texture of the hair, something called as a saphalic index which is a measurement of your skull and then the nasal index, the skin colour, the height, the nature of the lip, the structure of the breast. On the basis of a series of similar kind of indicators they were able to categorize people or they came up with categories of human beings and then argue that there is a scientific basis for race and then race as a scientific category is something important. And British anthropology was more oriented towards studying social organisations such as kinship due to the influence of functionalism while that of the US was more oriented towards the analysis of culture, rituals, symbols, etc. This is again a kind of a distinction that you come across when you look into the British anthropology. For example, in British anthropology you had people like Radcliffe Brown or Malinowski or Evan Pritchard.

These are all the people who really championed social anthropology, looking into kinship system, into religion whereas people in the US they focused more on the kind of a culture, ritual, symbols and other things. So, there are this kind of two different orientations in these two states. Now, coming to the kind of an anthropological methods, what kind of methods did they make use or what are the most important widely used methods? And initially it began as an armchair theorization, talking about different

people, talking about different, talking about evolution, talking about how different people evolved differently. But later it became more intensive with the introduction of fieldwork, became the central anthropological methods. Later doing fieldwork became the central of the anthropological methods.

So what is fieldwork? Fieldwork is that you go to the field, you go and live with the people, you interact with the human beings and the field is a place where from where you gather lot of insights. And these insights are used for your further theorization. Something like a scientist working in a laboratory in which the data that he collects from the lab, from the lab equipment, so from the chemicals or things that he observed, or he records, it becomes the data for him. For an anthropologist what he or she observes, or he or she comes across or encounters in a social setting in a village or among a tribal group or an urban setting that becomes the data. So, the fieldwork continues to be an important element of anthropological method.

And you cannot do an anthropology or even sociology without having this component of fieldwork if you are going to do an original research. So doing fieldwork became the central of anthropological methods. Ethnography emerged as the most important one. It is nothing but a systematic detailing of the lives of subject population over an extended period of time. And it is a qualitative study where you study a group of people by becoming a part of that and participant observation is something very, very, is an integral part of that.

You, a researcher, he or she goes and then tries to immerse herself in that particular setting, observe things from a very close quarter, try to develop deep personal connection with his or her subjects and then try to gain insights about how this particular group of people live. And the specific method used was participant observation. Participant observation, you participate in that particular group simultaneously you observe their activities. And this is a very complicated proposition because you are a stranger. For example, if a foreigner, mostly if an anthropologist is a foreigner, then with the very look she might look different or she will look different and then living as an alien, as a stranger in a group of people is very different.

So to what extent you can actually participate, to what extent you are supposed to participate, to what extent you can become a member of the society is again is a very, very interesting as well as complicated question. Whether are you expected to become a part of society and it again depends upon your acceptance by others and also from an ethical point of view. To what extent you can become, or you should become a part of a member of the particular society. There are a series of ethical issues associated with that. But in spite of all these discussions and debates, this is a very important, very, very

valuable method of data collection.

You are trying to understand how people live in their natural settings. One of the greatest advantages of doing a participant observation is that it provides you with the opportunity to understand, observe and develop deeper insights about how people live in their natural setting. That is why for example, some of the anthropologists who study Indian villages, they study the same village say maybe for the past, for a stretch of 30 or 40 years. They must have come here as a PhD student, and they keep in touch with the village. They come to the village, stay there for months together and they go back again.

So they would have stayed in the village, or they would have kept in touch with the village over a span of 20 to 30 years. So that provides them with quite a lot of very, very intimate information, insights about how the village functions and how the village works. And that is why these debates about insider versus outside and the authentic voice, the whole question of a representation. To what extent the voice of the anthropologist is an authentic representation of the people.

Again, it is a complicated debate. We will discuss some of these debates later. But to what extent the anthropologist really represents the voice of the native informer is a fundamental question. Quite a lot of anthropologists have been criticized severely because what they present is not what the native population think that they are. So how can somebody claim to represent somebody because they are the native population never gets a population to represent themselves. Now you talk about maybe more recently you talk about a native ethnographer or a native anthropologist as anthropologist who is coming from that particular group itself.

A tribal person for example, who is trained in anthropology wanting to study his or her own tribe. That is something can be seen as a native ethnographer. Even there this debate remains but more importantly, more strikingly when somebody else comes and then studies other thing, this whole question of what the kind of a representation is, what is the kind of an authentic voice is something important. We will discuss that later. And if you very broad overview of some of the theoretical trends within social anthropology, you had early evolutionism, Henry Maine and E.B. Taylor etc. which you know as I mentioned tells you about the story of a uni-linear evolutionary model. It assumed that every society is supposed to pass through very distinct stage and then existed European society was seen as that had already reached its pinnacle. So that had a very rigid and Eurocentric understanding of social change. Then you had a diffusionism championed by Elliot Smith and H. R. Rivers, try to understand how say cultural artifacts and cultural ideas diffuse from one society to another. Then you had functionalism, heavily influenced by say sociology by Durkheim and others, Malinowski, Durkheim and

Marshall Mose and others. And you had structural functionalism especially in UK which was championed by scholars like Radcliffe Brown and Evans Pritchard which as I mentioned in the previous class tries to understand the connection between the structure of a society and its function. So, they assumed that the most important preoccupation of this theory, of this particular theory was about the social integration or social stability. So, they try to understand how a particular structure contributes to the maintenance of a social order of a society.

And then you had structuralism championed by Elie Wistow and Louis Dumont. Dumont has a very fascinating structuralist explanation about Indian society which we will discuss in detail. Then you had symbolic anthropology by Clifford Geertz and others. You had the poststructuralism, postmodernism by Foucault and Geertz and others. Of course, Foucault was not an anthropologist per se, but Foucauldian ideas have heavily influenced you know anthropological theorization.

So as you see the trajectory, the theoretical trajectory of anthropology is also, is variegated, it is very, very complex. It adopted and it accommodated a host of new trends and theories that emerged in different periods in history. That is why it remains to be a very vibrant discipline. So, we are concluding this discussion here and maybe in the coming class we will have a kind of a more broader look into the kind of a theoretical debates within sociology and anthropology. See you then. Thank you.