

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives
Dr. Santhosh R
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
Week-01
Lecture-04

Colonialism and Anthropology

Welcome back to the class. This is the fourth class in the first week of this course and in the previous three classes we had a very broad discussion about the disciplines sociology and anthropology looking into its methodological and theoretical evolutions. And in this class, I am focusing more on the relationship between colonialism and anthropology. And this is a very important central theme for our course that is in the society sociological perspectives because we know that ours was a colonial society and these disciplines that is sociology and anthropology came to India through colonial enterprise and especially anthropology played a very important role in especially sorry colonialism played a very important role in shaping Indian anthropology in a very very distinct way. So, study, academic study of Indian society is very closely connected with the process of colonialism and this is a very important argument. It is a very important premise which must inform your further understanding that the way in which Indian society was studied systematically was a foreign project.

It was heavily influenced by colonial or British understanding or British discipline that provided us with a kind of a particular type of understanding about Indian society which you know has been subjected to so much of discussions and debate. But even otherwise there is a very close connection between colonialism and anthropology in every colonial societies. So, as a discipline itself anthropology is very closely connected with colonialism and that has created quite a lot of discussions and debates. So in order to draw some attention to that not on Indian society particularly but in general I have I am using this essay by Louis Diana Lewis appeared in current anthropology in the year 1973 titled anthropology and colonialism.

And you know this is a very old essay almost 50 year old essay but it is important to see that the debate about colonialism and anthropology started emerging during 1970s and by 1980s, 1990s it was a very very raging debate. And this essay is reflective of such kind of tensions, such kind of tensions, concerns. So, I am following that you must be able to you know find this essay online, download this essay online and I strongly recommend you read this. So, she Diana Lewis she recognizes, or she acknowledges the crisis facing anthropology. She says that anthropology is in crisis and because of various reasons,

various reasons there is an unease, a sense of uneasiness among anthropologists.

They feel that their you know their claims are not taken seriously the increasing criticisms that anthropologists are using the native population or the information about native population for various other purposes. And so, there is so much of internal churning and critical reflections were going on among anthropologists. So, she recognizes the kind of a crisis facing anthropology. And the realization about its colonial legacy, subjects of study, disagreeing with the findings and questioning the anthropologist. So, this colonial legacy of anthropology itself is a major you know it is a baggage.

It is a major bloat on anthropology because anthropology cannot claim any sense of neutrality or any sense of you know objectivity or scientific neutrality because anthropology was bundled together with colonial enterprise. So that itself especially in post-colonial societies there was so much of criticism against the legacy of anthropology and again against individual anthropologists for their contribution in executing the orders or wishes of the colonial masters. And also, a host of other issues like the subjects of study disagreeing with the findings. This is a very interesting scenario. Somebody comes and then they study about a particular group and then writes a book.

But the people themselves find that what is depicted in the book is very different. They would say that this is not how we live. This is your outsider s view. We do not agree to your finding. And that really put the anthropologist in a spot.

So there are quite a lot of such kind of challenges and claims both political critic as well as intellectual critic started affecting this particular discipline. And increasing a distrust and hostility of people towards anthropologists. Quite a lot of people especially people who are coming from outside, the foreigners or urban educated people going to study the rural people and people not trusting them, people distrusting them or people developing even open hostility towards that. So, there are quite a lot of facts. And critic about the inability of anthropologist to acknowledge the political implications of their work.

So this is also very important criticism saying that many of the anthropologist are really incapable or either they are knowingly or unknowingly refusing to understand the political implications of their work. Because they know that their findings and their writings will be appropriated by the state, by the colonial enterprise and by a host of other agencies which could be used in a detrimental manner to the interest of the subject population. But still they, many times they refuse to understand, or they have the inability to understand that. So, now anthropology as understood in the West. This is something to talk about the context in which anthropology emerged.

So immediate and practical purpose of anthropology was to fill the gaps of western man's knowledge about himself. Given the significance of anthropology as a tool in western man's search for self-understanding, it was an important methodological assumption that the study of the primitive non-western world could take place only from the vantage point of the westerner or outside. And this is a very, very important recurring theme. This theme we will come, this argument we will come across when we study say for example Orientalism or when we study say even even Subaltern studies. You will see that the social sciences in general, modern social sciences in general or anthropology in particular, emerged in a very specific historical context, in a very specific historical or geographical location that is Europe, especially western Europe.

And this was a product of western man, not even woman, just notice that. It was a western man's urge to understand himself by trying to find more about the other. So, there is very important connection between the other and the self. As you know that a self is always constituted only by contrast distinguishing it from the other. Without the other there is no self.

We all know that. We might not recognize it but without another, there is no simple sense of self, especially individual or even collective self. A self is always constituted by the process of othering. So, the fundamental argument of the scholars who have criticized anthropology thoroughly is that this entire enterprise of anthropology was a product of western man's innate desire to know more about themselves. So, that what they did was to western man's search for self-understanding.

It was important methodological assumption that the study of the primitive non-western world could take place only from the vantage point of the westerner or outside. So, the second corresponding factor is that only the west will be able to understand or to write about the non-western people. There are scholars, host of scholars, western scholars have attributed that the non-western people cannot write or think about their history because they simply lack a historical consciousness. Only the west has a historical consciousness, the non-western people lack that historical consciousness. So, it combines these two things.

One, that they have an important urge to understand about themselves and this is realized by studying other. Secondly, the kind of a claim that only we can understand them. The opposite possibility is not possible. They cannot study you because they do not have this kind of a historical consciousness. The anthropologists like the other European in a colony occupied a position of economic, political and psychological superiority versus the subject of people and this is another very important factor.

An anthropologist usually goes with the explicit support and encouragement of the colonial enterprise most often and because of that very reason he has the, he simply cannot, he simply can go wherever he wants and then study the whichever people that he wants to study. And this is again the opposite scenario is impossible. A colonized person cannot go to a colony and then study. I hope you understand the contrast. An Indian cannot or Indian could not go to London for example as an anthropologist, sociologist and then walk into a community, into a western white man's family and then say that I have come here to study your family.

Impossible. That was never possible and even now it is impossible. On the other hand, it was much easier for them to come to walk into any of the houses or any tribal or village population and say that we have come here to study that. So, there is an already always existing positional superiority of the white man because he occupies a position of economic, political, and psychological superiority. And they enjoyed all the privilege and patronage of colonial administration. This is again very important point.

I have, we have mentioned it several times. Many of the anthropologists undertook their academic enterprise at the behest of colonial administration. At the behest of colonial administration and they were directly or indirectly encouraged and then given all support by the colonial enterprise. There could be very few people who are maybe exceptional to that. Verrier Elwin, a very very important anthropologist who tried, who studied tribals in India.

He could be one of the very notable exceptions. But in general, this is the story. Now, coming to another very important touchy issue is colonialism and anthropological and colonial racism. Racism is developed by a group to justify its privileged position. As we know that, there was a huge scientific enterprise, there was a huge scientific explanation behind racism.

Racial categorization was seen as scientific. As we mentioned in the previous class, there was very rigorous anthropometric, you know, scales were used to categorize people into different, you know, watertight compartments, Eurasian, Caucasian, you know, Negroid, host of different kinds of racial categories. And these racial categories obviously have a kind of a hierarchical character by keeping the Caucasian people, the white people on the top and keeping the Negroid, the blacks at the bottom and keeping others in between. And we know the most infamous, you know, tragedy in human history, the Holocaust was a product of this racist discrimination, and which was backed by science and rationality and modern technology during that particular time. So, racism is developed by a group to justify its privileged position.

It argues that there are three ideological basis of colonial racism. One, the gulf between the cultures of the colonialist and the colonized. Two, the exploitation of these differences for the benefit of the colonialist. And three, the use of the supposed difference as standards of absolute fact. The anthropological behaviour and conceptual formulations participate in all these three.

So, the colonial racism actually it rested upon these three important factors. One is that there is a, there is a, there is a different, there is a gulf between the culture of the colonialist and the colonized. They are different, we are different. If they are traditional, we are modern. They are superstitious, we are rational.

They are collective, we are individual. They are agrarian or feudal, we are industrial. So, there is so much of binaries were created and it was presented as if there is hardly anything common between these two civilizations. They say, there is a unsurmountable gulf between these two categories. And secondly, they exploitation of these differences for the benefit of the colonialists.

And that came, you know, as a part of that, even while they claim that they have here to uplift you. You know, this very famous argument about or rather infamous argument about the white man s burden or the colonizing mission. They had used this very, beautiful terms to cover up their process of exploitation. And the three, the use of the supposed difference as a standard of absolute fact. And to present that these are inherent facts.

These are inherent traits which cannot be, you know, changed. So, an anthropologist according to Diana Lewis has actively participated in each of these factors. And Galtung describes the process as scientific colonialism, a process whereby the center of gravity of the acquisition of knowledge about the nation is located outside the nation itself. A major aspect of this process is the idea of unlimited right to access to data of any kind, just as the colonial power felt it had the right to lay its hands on any product of commercial value in the territory. This is again very, very interesting argument about scientific colonialism.

Galtung is a very, you know, very important philosopher, sociologist who has written extensively on violence. For example, his arguments about say cultural violence and symbolic violence are very, very important. So, he argues that colonialism was not only colonialism in terms of economic exploitation or political exploitation. Colonialism also had a kind of a scientific dimension. You know that there is a colony here, there is a colonizer here and all the material resources from here were taken into the empire.

For example, India was systematically looted. Every colonies were systematically impoverished and looted and all resources, men, wealth, you know, raw materials, everything were taken from there and they were processed and then were sold back. You know, we know that particular kind of story. So, here the argument of Galtung and others is that the similar practice was used even in the production of knowledge. The idea of unlimited right to access, so these colonies were used as a place for mining data.

Data in the form of, you know, your information about society, information about caste, religion, tradition and this was taken out by anthropologists and processed in the universities of west, published and, you know, processed and published there, taught there, making them more, you know, enriched. So, ultimately the data, the colonies turn out to be the place to supply data to the anthropologists or sociologists who are coming from outside. So, just like how economic exploitation happened, similarly a scientific exploitation also happens in the similar way without having given any benefit to that of the colonies and this is a very, very powerful argument, very powerful argument to which the anthropological establishment has not much convincing answers to give. So, there is a direct relationship between scientific validity of a study and the degree of objectivity thought to be associated with the approach. This is based on the assumption that there is a single valid reality and that through proper training the fieldwork, worker learns methods to approximate this reality.

So, again the claim of the anthropologist, anthropologist s claim up to superiority comes from the fact that we have come here to study you professionally. We have come to study you systematically. We have come to study you through the help of a well-established discipline like anthropology. And from where does this claim come from? Where does this claim emerge or what is the kind of a ideological and theoretical background to this particular claim? And he, it is a very common argument that this claim to objectivity, that there is an objective reality out there and we have some kind of an access to that particular reality, and we alone have the access to that particular reality come from a particular understanding of positivist understanding of objectivity. And anthropology as a discipline heavily used this particular claim to objectivity because they argued that by using specific theoretical methodological orientation, we will be able to objectively depict a particular society.

We will be able to create an unbiased depiction about that particular society. And this according to her emerges from a kind of a idea that there is a single valid reality. And the claim that a proper training in the fieldwork learned methods of approximating this reality. And this now nobody accepts this particular argument. Nobody accepts this particular argument at least the claims to complete objectivity, neutrality, truth all these

things are watched, or they are seen with lot of skepticism.

But this claim is heavily problematic. Writers have stressed cultural factors such as the social, political and economic positions of the investigator and the degree to which these influence the hypothesis he formulates, the approaches he chooses and the data that he selects. So, as we mentioned or as quite a lot of subsequent developments demonstrate a particular theoretical framework, or a methodological approach is heavily influenced by the social, political, and economic position of the investigator. An investigator can never rescue himself or herself from his or her locations. You cannot really dislodge your identity and then emerge as a person completely unattached to anything social.

It is impossible. You cannot really get rid of all your ideological commitments or ideological inclinations. You cannot get rid of your identity, you cannot get rid of your biases, your personal biases. How much well trained you are, it is impossible to assume a position of absolute neutrality and absolute objectivity. So, when anthropologist assumed the role of objective observer, his behavior significantly affected the relationship between himself and his informants. It assured both his estrangement from and his super ordinate position in relation to those he studied.

So, this is another consequence of this whole idea that I come here as an objective analyst or objective examiner of you. So, I am more equipped intellectually, methodologically, scientifically I am more equipped to understand that. So, this creates a kind of a sense of his estrangement from that. You are supposed to get yourself estranged from the community. You are supposed to be, you have to maintain a kind of a distance with that.

At the same time, you have a kind of a superiority because of your training and other things. And this results in treating the objects of study as things and not to have any emotional personal involvement. And this again a dark side of anthropological, especially the colonial anthropological stories, how many of the very well-known anthropologist looked down upon their subjects have depicted them in some of the most ugly forms or many of the anthropologists who were kind of had very racist intentions or racist tendencies in their mind. There are quite a lot of very, very interesting controversies about some of the stalwarts in anthropology. Some of their unpublished works were found out later in which they had kind of depicted their population, their subject population in very, very uncharitable terms.

So, this is another story. How many of these celebrated western anthropologists were racial in their outlook and other things. So, the latter part of the essay, I am not going much into that. It actually talks about a host of other possibilities. Now, the first part of

the essay or the, yeah, at least till the middle, she talks about a series of crises, series of issues that are discussed and debated within anthropology.

And the second part, she talks about the possibilities. She talks about the possibilities of reformulating the practice of anthropology. And it is very interesting to see that many of her prescriptions or many of her formulations have been accepted and they are widely practiced in many social contexts now. They are, they emerged as a result of this very incessant criticism within the discipline. And there was so much of internal criticism and self-reflection and that has led to quite a lot of changes within the theory as well as practice of the discipline of anthropology. For example, the anthropologist as an insider, the tendency was that anthropologist always goes to the other place, especially a kind of a traditional or in a primitive society and then study.

So, why do not you study your own society? Why do you shy away from studying your own society as if your society has nothing to be studied? So, there was a lot of arguments about the need for the western society, western anthropologists to study their own societies and also to encourage native anthropologists to democratize the discipline, to train people from the third world, train people from the colonies, train people from tribal communities, train people from different localities so that they are well equipped in the methods and theories of anthropology, yet they will be able to study their own society with more proficiency. It is not that always an outsider has to come and then study them. Why not an insider study their own society and then to democratize the whole discipline. And it also kind of raised lot of studies about, debates about the insider versus outsider debate, who can understand the society better, whether the insider understands society better or the outsider.

Again, it is an endless debate. We know that both positions have their own benefits, and an insider might be able to provide more insights, more inside information about his own community or her own community. But on the other hand, a lot of things which would be otherwise identified by an outsider might escape the eyes of this insider because these things might look so normal to them. These might, things might look so natural to them. An important task of an anthropologist is to find the the unnaturalness in anything that is presented as natural. For a person living in a particular social context or a cultural context, his life is normal.

Or her life is normal. The choices that people make are very normal. For example, the practice of getting an arranged marriage in India is that is the normal. That is the normal. At the time of a marriage age, your parents look for somebody and the whole community or relatives, they conduct the marriage for you. And the boy and the girl will basically will not have much to say about about their preferences in the traditional typical sense.

This is the natural for an inside person. But this might look very very strange for somebody coming from a different context, where this arranged, the practice of arranged marriage unheard of. On the other hand, the practice of dating might look very very strange and very outrageous to a traditional society. So, to what extent you can reformulate your sensibilities about what is normal, what is abnormal, what is strange, what is accepted, acceptable, accepted.

These are important debates. And again, the question of who represents. Should we go by the argument that only an insider can represent his community? This is again a very very loud argument nowadays that we are here to represent ourselves. But that again is a problematic statement. Now, who, you means who, who are you? Because it is very difficult to claim the representation of an entire community. Because a single person has a different set of identities, which may not be shared by others.

For example, a person studying a Dalit community. And can he be able to claim the representation of the whole entire community? For example, a gender comes in picture, a sub-caste comes in picture, the class position comes in picture. So, how does one negotiate that? So, these positionalities have really complicated these whole questions of representation. We will discuss that in detail in one of the coming chapters. How the intersectionality, the term that is used is intersectionality.

Intersectionality of caste, gender and religion or other ethnic identities. How these factors complicate the whole question of representation? Can somebody authentically and authoritatively represent one group? What does it mean to represent a group? Who is the actual representative? Very, very fascinating debates between some of the important philosophers of our time. We will discuss that. So, that is what this point about native ethnographer who studies his own modern urban society. This is the point that we just mentioned that instead of studying the other primitive people, why don't you study? And one important reason is this hardly any primitive society is left to be studied.

Most of them have studied, already been studied by western scholars. But even otherwise, you know, anthropology has transformed tremendously from a sole focus on this primitive tribal people. Anthropology has diversified into quite a lot of modern new, you know, fields. You have anthropology of consumption, anthropology of mass media, you know, anthropology of leisure, anthropology of fashion. So, virtually there is no field in which, you know, anthropology shies away from studying that. The age-old distinction between, that is the sociology studies, the industrial modern society and anthropology studies, the traditional tribal society, that demarcation has simply collapsed now.

Anthropology has emerged as a discipline that has a very strong focus on the modern urban industrial societies. So, that is the story of anthropology so far. So, this is the, these are the, you know, discussions that I wanted to have as a prelude to this discussion on colonialism and anthropology. And again, we will come back to this topic when we look into, look specifically into how Indian society was studied.

What have been the influence of colonialism in the study of Indian society. So, that time we will discuss these points more in detail, specifically in connection with the Indian society. So, we will wind up the class today. We will stop now and see you for the next class. Thank you.