UNIT 1 DEFINING ANTHROPOLOGY

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Learning Objectives

This unit deals with the understanding of anthropology as a science of humankind in pursuit of understanding diversity and variation. This unit also deals with the discussion of comparative method in anthropology. After going through the writings in this unit, you would be able to know:

- emergence of anthropology as a science of human beings;
- anthropology as a holistic science with human beings as its subject matter;
- aspects of studying diversity and variation in anthropology;
- importance of studying diversity and variation;
- the issues related to the study of diversity and variation;
- anthropological study of diversity and variation in Indian context;
- comparative method in anthropology; and
- relevance of comparative method.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit will trace the emergence of anthropology as a study of human beings. Anthropology is the study of man (which includes both women and men) in time and space. It is very important to know how this discipline came up. The emergence of anthropology marks the subject as a holistic science of man. Besides this, anthropology also emerged as a subject of studying diversity and variation among human beings. It always explores around the differences in human society and culture. To understand these differences anthropology follows the comparative method. It studies one society in respect of other human societies. Comparative method has a
historical base in anthropological studies and this method has its own importance in the discipline.

Section 1.2 of this unit discusses the emergence of anthropology as a science of human beings and its holistic approach in studying them. The same section describes anthropology as the science of human beings in understanding diversity and variation in human society and culture. It also includes anthropological issues related to the study of diversity and variation, like ethnic conflict and racism. The same matter of discussion has also been discussed in the Indian context in the same unit.

Section 1.3 discusses comparative method in anthropological study. It explores various dimensions related to this method like history and its relevance.

### 1.2 EMERGENCE OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropology started with the narrative of human culture and society. Though the interest towards studying human beings can be traced back to the fifth century B.C. with the writings of Herodotus, the emergence of anthropology as a distinct discipline occurred recently only during the nineteenth century. The development of scholarship came after the Europeans who had been travelling to distant corners of the globe for about four hundred years since the age of Columbus. The explorers in the course of their voyage visited different people and diverse customs. With the advent of colonialism, missionaries, traders and government officials also started visiting different parts of the world. These people took huge interest in knowing different people and their culture with whom they encountered for their own benefit. For the government officials it became a part of their administrative strategy to know the diverse cultures of those people whom they administered. The missionaries had a religious goal. They wanted to spread their own religious ideology. For this it was necessary for them to know the language and cultural values of the people among whom they wanted to spread their ideology. The missionaries even went far beyond this. They not only studied the culture patterns of these people, but they also took some initiatives to improve the life style of these people in their own terms, thus introducing culture change. Likewise traders also had their own economic interest and hence attempted to know the diversity of these people. Explorers from the days of Columbus who wrote about these people and their customs had almost no political interest except to communicate their ‘strange’ experience of meeting people who were different from their own. The interest to know about ‘other cultures’ in anthropology, started with this. The people other than the Europeans were the point of interest. Explorers could only notice the variety of human culture by keeping themselves within the safe boundary of a much more ‘competent’ and ‘advanced’ culture, i.e. the European culture. So, their writings reflected superimposed ideas and narrations about these simple cultures and societies which they encountered. Early anthropologists started their study with these works only. These writings helped to develop the anthropological temperament and by following these narratives, anthropological study emerged. The first theory in anthropology was propounded by Henry Lewis Morgan as the theory of evolution and this was of course based on these travel accounts to a great extent, although Morgan did go for some sort of fieldwork.

In India, anthropological work began with the works of missionaries and government officials. These people wrote many monographs on different tribes of India. British colonial rule gave a colonial impression to anthropology in India. It was thought that anthropology was nothing but a tool to expand colonial rule. It was considered as a means to communicate with the common people of India who had different cultural
Anthropology is considered as the product of scientific development in the western world. The tradition of social philosophy continued till the advent of industrialisation in the west and it emerged as a distinct discipline in the nineteenth century. With Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, new thoughts and ideas emerged in the field of anthropology. The study of human evolution became the prime concern for the anthropologists. Many scholars defined anthropology as the study of origin and development of humanity. Scholars like R.R. Marret (1912) termed anthropology as the ‘child of Darwin’. From this time onwards anthropology progressed with a new pace. Different theoretical dimensions started developing like, evolutionism, structural-functionalism, functionalism, structuralism etc. A good number of scholars contributed to the field of anthropology. Different branches within the discipline came up. The British school of thought defines anthropology as having three basic branches: 1) biological or physical anthropology, 2) social anthropology, and 3) archaeology. On the other hand American school of thought considers four major branches of anthropology: 1) physical anthropology, 2) cultural anthropology, 3) archaeology and 4) linguistic anthropology. In India generally we follow the British school of thought. Each of these major branches of anthropology has been assigned with some specific subject matter, but there is no specific boundary. All these branches are interdependent yet interlinked. Physical anthropology while studying biological aspects of man cannot ignore the cultural influence. Likewise, while studying material culture and its development, social anthropologists have to take into account its evolutionary growth and for this they refer to the archaeological findings of prehistoric culture. It is the same with prehistoric archaeologists also. To identify the cultural use of some prehistoric findings, they have to refer to the present context with which the social anthropologists deal. Again social anthropologists have to consider some biological aspects of human life while studying culture. There are some other sub-disciplines also, which have their own boundary of subject matter which is however not rigid, like economic anthropology, political anthropology, anthropology of religion, etc. They also deal with the different issues related to human life focusing on one particular field.

1.2.1 Holistic Science

Man is the most wonderful creature in this world. It is the only species in the animal kingdom having two aspects: biological and cultural. Man is the creator of his own culture. Anthropology is concerned with a rounded study of man, it studies man at all levels of culture. Unlike other disciplines like economics, political science or zoology, anthropology does not study only one aspect of human life. It covers all dimensions i.e. biological, cultural, environmental etc. Each and every matter related to human beings becomes the subject matter of anthropology. Thus, anthropology is a holistic science of man. It covers all aspects of man. We can take up the example of culture study. Within culture various aspects like art, religion, politics, economy, kinship, marriage, family, health, etc. are combined into one whole. On the other hand these cultural aspects differ from society to society. Anthropology not only deals with these various aspects of culture, but also explores the variety from all aspects. For example, if we take up kinship, we will see that anthropologists not only have studied kinship as an aspect of human culture but also have studied various kinship patterns in different societies in the world. So, anthropological study explores around particular to general and also sometimes general to particular. Sometimes it
is inductive logic and sometimes it is deductive logic. Anthropology has many theoretical issues regarding this aspect of exploration. But now the main issue over here is that irrespective of any theoretical issue, anthropology keenly examines all aspects of human life from each and every dimension. Thus, as mentioned before, anthropology is a holistic science of man. This holistic study of man has been clearly described in Unit 2 (Meaning, Scope and Background)

Activity

Try to identify the cultural variation in your area and examine whether it comes under the domain of anthropological study. Also try to find out the similarities and examine the importance of these similarities in anthropological study.

1.2.2 Understanding Diversity and Variety

The dictionary meaning of diversity is ‘a range of many people or things that are very different from each other’. On the other hand variety means ‘several different sorts of the same thing’. Thus, diversity is a range which is a broad category covering different people and variety is relatively a smaller category defining difference within the same thing.

Anthropologically, these two words are very important as it, in a nut shell, defines the whole area of anthropological research. As we have already discussed that anthropology is a holistic science and it studies all aspects of human beings, anthropology not only studies such aspects but also examines these aspects from various dimensions identifying differences within it. Diversity and variation thus becomes the core of anthropological study.

Emergence of anthropology, as we have already discussed, began with the curiosity of man to know differences among themselves. The European voyagers while exploring identified different people with varied customs and this developed the anthropological interest to know about diversity in human beings. Diversity was the initiation point for anthropological research. People wondered why members of the same species, homo sapiens differ culturally. Biologically, homo sapiens is one species capable to interbreed. But, culturally the same species defines certain rules which do not suit the biological definition of species. Human beings have different mating patterns according to their own cultures. Different societies have different forms of marriage. Thus, man has diverse patterns of mating and variety of marriage rituals. Anthropology basically deals with these diversities and varieties.

The scope of anthropology includes two dimensions: the objectives or aims of the discipline and the subject matter covered by it. The general understanding of anthropology is that it tries to study human beings including all its aspects. Secondly, employing the comparative method, anthropology finds similarities and differences in diverse societies and population. This helps anthropologists to move from differences to similarities and also enables them to construct universal anthropological theories.

Anthropologists employ a variety of tools and techniques to study these complex characteristics that define the human enterprise. The study of anthropology is concerned with understanding biological, cultural and other aspects that define life among peoples across the world. The basic premise of anthropology is that all humans are born with the same physical characteristics but depending on where they are born and raised, they adopt different cultural, ethical and religious mores. It is this conditioning or the effect of different cultures on humans as they evolve with time.
that comprises the study of anthropology. Considering the vast nature of the scope of study associated with anthropology, it can be said that the canvas is hugely broad and that anthropologists indeed have their tasks cut out.

The branches of anthropology are divided into sub branches. These sub branches add to the wide variety of research material that is available in this field and the researchers in these branches do their bit to enrich our understanding of where we come from, why we are the way we are and other questions. To understand what the study of anthropology is, we need to delve deep into these branches and the way in which anthropologists study complex societies. An example of this is the ant-hill with its various divisions of labour and the often complex interactions between the members.

If we go deeper to the branches of anthropology, we will see the diverse fields with which they deal. Physical or biological anthropology looks at human beings as a biological organism and tries to find out: 1) what characteristics make them different from other organisms, 2) what characteristics they have in common. While studying evolution the physical anthropologists try to find various factors influencing human evolution. For this they need to do research among various communities to identify such factors. Population-wise physical characters differ. Environmental conditions also make differences. These are the various dimensions with which physical anthropologists need to deal with. Sub-branches of physical anthropology like paleoanthropology, primatology, racial history, human genetics, and population study, etc., deal with various other aspects. Paleoanthropology and primatology basically deal with the evolution of man. Paleoanthropology derives data from the fossil remains while primatology studies living apes which have an evolutionary relation with the ancestors of humans. On the other hand racial history studies living races. They consider the different traits of physical manifestation (skin colour, eye and hair, quality and distribution of hair on the body, eye colour, shape of the nose, eyelid, body weight, general body build, etc.) and compare these among contemporary human populations in order to find out the basis of human variation. Racial history occupies a very important role in the study of growth and development. Human genetics attains a very important position in anthropology too. Genetics throws light on the ways of inheritance which helps anthropologists to understand the complicated process of evolution and variation. The academic field of population genetics includes several hypotheses and theories regarding genetic diversity. The neutral theory of evolution proposes that diversity is the result of the accumulation of neutral substitutions. Diversifying selection is the hypothesis that two sub-populations of a species live in different environments that select for different alleles at a particular locus.

Another major branch of anthropology is archaeology. Archaeology is concerned with the study of extinct cultures. To trace the human cultural evolution, it is necessary to reconstruct the prehistoric past. Cultural anthropology deals with the social behaviour of human beings where the past and the present are equally important for them. They stress the emergence and development of customs and social behaviour from the prehistoric level and goes up to the contemporary level where both the primitive and civilized people form social counterparts.

Social anthropology, another branch of anthropology studies social behaviour and organisation of social groups. We have already discussed how this branch deals with the diverse cultural aspects taking into consideration variation in it.
Another branch of anthropology is linguistic anthropology (following the American school of thought). Here also we see that the focus is on the study of diversity and variation. Culture is an important aspect of human behaviour. Transmission of culture from one generation to the other has been possible only through language. Linguistic anthropologists, study language and deal with the emergence and divergence of languages over time. The different branches of anthropology are discussed in detail in Unit 3 (Branches of Anthropology) of this block.

Thus from the above discussions we can understand how anthropology study human kind in pursuit of understanding diversity and variation. Each and every branch of anthropology deals with this dimension. In fact, it is one of the core matters of anthropological study.

Activity
Try to make a list of diverse fields of Anthropology dealing with diversity and variation.

1.2.3 Issues Related to the Study of Diversity and Variation: Racism and Ethnic Conflict

While describing anthropology as the study of humankind in pursuit of understanding diversity and variation we often face some critical issues. These issues bring out some questions like: Why do we need to study diversity and variation? Various conflicts among different communities are observed, the basis of which is these variations and diversities. Do we really need to make our differences distinct by studying them in great detail? To discuss these issues we will take up two examples—racism and ethnic conflict.

We have already mentioned that racial history has occupied an important place in anthropology. All human beings living today belong to the single species homo sapiens which includes different groups or populations each differing from other populations in the relative commonness of certain hereditary traits. Each of these populations constituting the species homo sapiens may be regarded as a race.

The skeletal material of different periods gathered from diverse parts of the world show that hybridisation among different human populations has been taking place since long past. Race admixture is an ongoing process and as a result a pure race does not remain. Hybridisation, on the one hand is responsible if partially for race formation and on the other it is also involved in the extinction or assimilation of racial groups. Therefore, we can say that there was never a pure race of man and at present too there is no pure race.

Scientists have accepted the fact that each of the various races differ from the others in relative frequency of certain heritable traits. They are interested in the study of nature and extent of such variations and similarities among the various racial groups. They try to account for this inequality of human races. This type of scientific and objective type of study of different aspects of race has nothing to do with the issue of racism. Racists look at races from a different angle. Racism believes that certain races are underdeveloped and as such are inferior to the others. Anthropologists point out that racism involves the assertion that inequality is absolute and unconditional, i.e., that a race is inherent and by its very nature superior or inferior to others quite independently of physical conditions of its habitat and of social factors. During the Second World War racism led to the death of many innocent people in Germany.
Likewise in America also it created many inhuman conditions. Black skinned people were considered to be inferior to white skinned people in all aspects. Many people faced human discrimination. In this context, anthropologists argue that race and ethnicity are cultural constructs that have almost no correlates in real human physical attributes. Anthropologists contends that the biological basis of race is a colonial construct to represent the non-western others as inferior.

Ethnic conflict on such a notion of racism has become very common in today's world. Exploitation and discrimination for many long years made ethnic groups or races intolerable and it resulted into conflicts. After the Second World War a general consensus came out to secure human rights. The United Nations also took steps to finish racial discrimination and UNESCO too passed a statement on the concept of race and the scientific study of race stating that race is biological and no race is superior to the other. Anthropological or any other scientific research on race has created the field for ethnic and racial conflict. There are many other factors. We can take up the example of the racial conflict in Rwanda between the Tutsi and the Hutus. Hutus and the Tutsis had almost the same physical characteristics with little anthropometric differences. These two groups shared the same geographical area. But it was the Belgian colonial power in the 1930s on the basis of cattle ownership, physical measurements and church records, issued identity cards to these groups thus creating a racial distinction. These documents played a key role in the genocide of 1994.

Thus we can see that there are many issues related to the study of diversity and variation. Anthropologists have faced many such issues and at the same time it has regained the status of a scientific study that carefully handles these crucial issues. Anthropologists now-a-days are taking keen interest in the study of ethnic and racial conflicts. Many theoretical dimensions are also coming out from such studies.

1.2.4 Understanding Diversity and Variation in the Indian Context

India being a multicultural democratic country exhibits a very diverse population having cultural and social differences. Anthropologists from the very beginning have taken immense interest in studying these diverse cultures and societies. Anthropologists from outside or inside India have taken up studies among various tribal people of India starting from North-east India to the south. Early anthropologists like S.C. Roy, M.N. Srinivas etc., have written many monographs on these tribal people depicting various diverse ways of life. Village study in India has also revealed many diverse cultural aspects. Theologies like tribe-caste continuum, sacred complex, little and great tradition have also appeared. Various social institutions like marriage, kinship, and politics have also been studied. These institutions showcase the diverse nature of Indian culture. For example, in Meghalaya the Khasi practice matrilinial system of marriage; in south India Todas have a peculiar kind of marriage system. Likewise, caste system in India is unique. These castes follow a special form of relationship with each other. Sometimes even among Hindus, which is a single religion, practice of different forms of rituals are seen. On the other hand the tribal people and these caste groups also share a special kind of relation. Sometimes it is of suppression, sometimes it is of cooperation. Thus, various dimensions can be found in India itself and anthropologists through the years have been exploring all these and more.
1.3 COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CULTURE AND POPULATION

Anthropology conducts comparative study of culture and population. It has been one of the most ancient and popular method of anthropological investigation. In fact, anthropological research started with this dimension.

Anthropologists study man in totality. Social anthropologists try to find out what is common to all societies and at the same time what is different to all societies. For this social anthropologists need to carry out a comparative study of the societies. To gather full understanding of a society it is necessary to examine the same in the context of another. So, for the anthropologists it becomes important to conduct comparative study of the societies and populations.

In a social anthropological comparative study there are many levels of comparison. First, a social anthropologist compares a single society with other societies. Second, he compares one or two institutions of other societies and third, he compares the institutions within a single society.

The history of the use of comparison as a method goes back to the nineteenth century. During this period the theory of evolution was in great practice. The exponents of the comparative method in British social anthropology were Emile Durkheim and E.E. Evans Pritchard. This method has the following objectives:

1) It is through these methods social anthropologists reconstruct the past and discover the laws that govern the social process. Comparison of particular features of social life for the purpose of historical reconstruction has great value.

2) It is through this that we make classification of the social systems in different categories such as caste, class and groups. Comparative method is deployed for discovering the social process; and to classify the social systems of all the societies of the world as well.

1.3.1 Development of Comparative Method in Social Anthropology

Comparative method has more than a hundred years of history in social anthropology. Durkheim used it first as a reliable method of data generation. In his classical work the *Rules of the Sociological Method* (1895) for the first time Durkheim explained the significance of comparative method. In the nineteenth century, the principal attraction of the comparative method lay in the belief that it could be used for discovering scientific laws about human society and culture.

Franz Boas contested the arguments of Durkheim, by suggesting that the latter had made only sweeping generalisations using comparative method. After Durkheim, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown pleaded the usefulness of the comparative method. In his Huxley memorial lecture in 1955 he argued that the comparative method was highly useful in social anthropology for restructuring human social history. At a later period of time Evans-Pritchard took up the theme of comparative method in his Hob House Lecture in 1963. He argued that despite all its scientific pretensions, the comparative method as used by Radcliffe-Brown and many others were little more than the illustrative method.

In the nineteenth century and the mid twentieth century, there were different attitudes of social anthropologists towards the use of comparison. Comparative method also faced many criticisms.
In India too many anthropologists used this method. Anthropologists in India have conducted many intercultural and cross cultural comparisons. Among these, names may be mentioned of D. N. Majumdar, N. K. Bose and Irawati Karve.

1.3.2 Relevance of Comparative Method: Present Perspective

Even today the comparative method in anthropology occupies a major place in anthropological research. With the rapid change in society the comparative method is earning new methodological dimensions. Though comparative method is not the most popular research method in anthropology in today’s context, it is not merely a generalised study either. It has many dimensions in it which anthropologists apply accordingly. Comparative method can sometimes reveal very important findings. The matter of concern that should be of utmost importance is that comparison should be unbiased and justified. The main criticism that this method faces is that it compares primitive societies with the so called civilized, advanced societies and the result seems to be much generalised. It leads to the publication of biased analysis. Some societies are termed uncivilized in context of the other which ironically are studied by the people of these ‘advanced’ societies. Not only in the field of social anthropology but also in the field of archaeological and physical anthropology, there is the use of comparative method. In the field of population genetics, anthropologists compare the gene frequencies so as to find out the populations’ variations. Such studies cannot be done in one population. So, comparison becomes very important. Likewise, in the field of archaeological anthropology, two different past cultures need to be compared to find out the chronological relevance of the both. So, comparison becomes quite pertinent here too.

Criticisms can be sided apart by conducting an unbiased and scientific comparative study of the societies and it can reveal some very important anthropological findings. Thus, comparative method has its relevance in today’s context as well.

1.4 SUMMARY

After reading this unit you would be able to know the broad area covered by anthropology. You have learnt from this chapter how anthropology has developed as a holistic study of human beings. You have learnt how anthropology deals with the diversity and variation in human society and population. Anthropology primarily deals with diversity of human behavior and culture. The subject matter of anthropology revolves around diversity and variation. This has been widely discussed in Indian context as well. As an important part of this lesson we have discussed the comparative method. You have learnt how comparative method developed in the field of anthropological research and you have also learnt the relevance of it. Diversity and variation takes a major part in anthropological research. Different culture patterns, different societies and different human groups are the subject matter of anthropology and to study all this, anthropology has developed certain methods.

References


Suggested Reading


Sample Questions

1) Discuss how anthropology covers human diversity and variation within its subject matter.

2) Briefly discuss how anthropology emerged as a discipline which covers human diversity and variation.

3) Discuss diversity and variation in Indian context.

4) Discuss comparative method.

5) Discuss the relevance of comparative method in anthropology.