
UNIT 1 SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY: MEANING, SCOPE AND RELEVANCE

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit the learners would be able to:

- explain the concept of social and cultural anthropology;
- comprehend the reasons for distinguishing between social and cultural anthropology, the context in which it developed;
- figure out the application or scope of having learnt social and cultural anthropology; and
- grasp as to why it is important to be trained in social and cultural anthropology.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In order to know about social and cultural anthropology, the learner must first learn about what society is and what culture is? How are they related and how are they different? Most of us go through life taking these entities as given, we never reflect on the fact that society and culture are not like the natural environment, they are not given and they are not created by any divine intervention, although for a long time, people did believe that society was a creation of God and that culture was something that was divinely ordained. Let us take for example the matter of food, or what we eat. Many people, in fact a majority of people across the globe eat what they *consider* food, in other words not merely something edible or something that a human body can digest, but something that they believe *should* be eaten, and similarly there are foods that cannot be eaten, again not because they are not food in the biological sense of the word, and there are people who do eat what some other people consider non- food. Even more than that, for many people some things are forbidden by religion or as they believe by their God; so that eating of forbidden foods may actually be a sin.

But if we reflect upon all these taboos and examine them from an intellectual point of view, it becomes clear that these are forbidden not by god but by culture, and these cultural taboos are often a product of history, of circumstances and may have their hidden rationality (Harris 1985). Again, reflecting upon what is society and what is culture, we come to the conclusion that these are human creations, may be not conscious, but certainly by the operation of reasoning that evolves over historical time and is situated within social, economic and political contexts. Neither society, nor culture is static. They evolve and transform over time. What may have been considered wrong at one point of time becomes right at another point of time. In this unit we would examine these concepts in somewhat greater details.

1.1 SOCIETY AND CULTURE

A human child is born into a pre-existing set of social relationships. As soon as a child is born, it has some relatives, that include its parents, its siblings, its grandparents and so on. These relatives in turn are part of a larger set of relationships we call a kinship network that may be part of an even larger group like a clan, or a caste, and finally the set of relationships is closed and we have a society that has an identity like a specific tribe, an ethnic group or a country, nation or linguistic community. The sense of belonging to a group is called as social identity. This identity can have several layers. Thus if one is an Indian, we can say that we belong to Indian society. Within Indian society, we can say we belong to a religious community, like being a Hindu or a Christian or we can be belonging to a tribe or to a caste group.

At each level, we can say that society is a network of relationships and belonging to a particular set of relationships gives us an identity. Some identities are the ones that we are born with, these are known as ascribed and some we pick up later in life and these are known as acquired. The identities that we are born with also make us into a particular type of person. Like speaking a particular language or even languages, eating a kind of food, following a particular way of life and worshipping particular deities and believing in certain things as if they were the truth. This last aspect is known as a world-view. Each one of us has a particular cognition about the world we live in, and have prescribed ways to deal with our life situations.

We are thus born into a set of relationships we call society and by virtue of being born in a specific time and place we acquire certain ways of doing and thinking that we call as culture. A culture is a way of life, a pattern of doing things, and a set of meanings that we impose upon the world around us. It is through culture that everything around us becomes meaningful. It is culture that also makes human beings different from each other for culture is an acquired and not a genetic trait.

As humans we are one species and as a species we have common traits. One of these human traits is the capacity for symbolic behaviour or the capacity for abstract thinking. Human beings can imagine, they can attribute meanings to objects that is not an inherent property of that object. Thus sounds for humans can become organised into language where sounds take on meanings that are arbitrarily assigned to them. This is the reason why there are so many, in fact numerous human languages, each different from the other. We can call for example a frog in so many different ways and this is possible because none of these sounds that mean a frog in different languages are in any way connected with the frog as an object. In other words all labels and names (sounds) are arbitrary. This is the reason why humans as one species show the largest variety in what they eat, do or the way in which they live.

We do not live by our genetics or our instincts but by a self- acquired mechanism called culture (Kaplan and Manners 1972).

But to have culture one must be a part of a society for as already indicated culture is not an inherent trait, it is acquired. So how does a human acquire culture, it is by being born in and being brought up in a society. We learn to live in society in a way that society can reproduce itself. We learn to behave according to rules that we call as social norms. These social norms and rules are acquired by transmission through processes we call as socialisation or the way in which a human child is brought up by its adult care givers. We also acquire or learn the ways of life and the meanings that provide the blue print for behaviour, like what to eat and how to eat, what to wear and how to wear, how to behave like a proper member of the society and how not to live so as to not become a social drop out. These ways of moving, speaking, the knowledge of collective meanings is called as culture and the process of acquiring culture is called as enculturation.

These two processes go hand in hand. We learn there is something called a parent child relationship, this is socialisation and we learn the appropriate behaviour that goes with this relationship and this is called enculturation.

Check Your Progress 1

1. What is social identity?

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2. Explain the meaning of world- view.

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3. What do you understand by ascribed and achieved status?

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4. Is culture a genetically inherited trait?

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5. What is socialisation and enculturation?

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- 6. How is culture transmitted from one generation to the next?

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1.2 SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Social anthropology deals primarily with the study of social relationships and the study of what we call as social institutions like family, kinship, political institutions and economic institutions. They study norms and rules of behaviour and the structures that constitute society.

Cultural anthropologists study symbols and meaning systems, they study values and beliefs and what are the underlying principles that guide action. Although related, the two branches emphasize different aspects and approach their subject matter differently. For example, if one is studying political institutions from a social perspective, then one will study the institutional structure of the political system, like if it is a Panchayat, then the structure of personnel, their rights and duties, the hierarchy and norms and principles of interaction etc. If one is studying the political arena from a cultural perspective then, one will not focus on the structural aspects but will focus on the negotiations of power, the strategies and the tactics by which power is used and manipulated. From a cultural perspective one may focus not on the positions themselves but the processes by which these are obtained. The cultural anthropologists would focus on the symbols by which power is manifested and the subtle use of meanings in expressing and maintaining power.

Historically the social anthropological perspective was developed in Britain and the European continent, following the French School of Mauss, Hubert and Durkheim. The doyens of the social anthropological perspective were scholars like A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Bronislaw Malinowski, Raymond Firth and others of the British school and they influenced Indian anthropologists like M.N. Srinivas and others. Structures of hierarchy, co-operation and association, formal rules of behaviour and norms of interaction forms the focus of social anthropological analysis.

Cultural anthropology developed in the U.S.A for historical reasons. The founding father of cultural anthropology in America was Franz Boas. He was followed by his students, such as Alfred Kroeber, Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Ruth Bunzel and other distinguished scholars like Darryl Forde, Melville Herskovits, Ralph Linton and others. It deals more with the super-organic (cultural) aspects than with actual existing social relationships as most of the indigenous people of America were dispersed or eliminated in the process of colonisation. Culture also examines the historical and environmental aspects as culture is supposed by definition to be historically derived and environmentally contextualised. Thus in a cultural approach we will examine how cultural traits develop, diffuse, adapt to the surroundings and how they form part of a larger system of meanings.

While cultural aspects like meanings and values are also discussed in a social relational approach, they are subverted to the primary focus on structures. Similarly in a cultural approach the structures form only a background against which meanings and symbols are contextualised.

Check Your Progress 2

7. What do social anthropologists focus on when they study communities?

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8. What aspects of society do cultural anthropologists emphasise?

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9. Name some of the early scholars who worked in the field of social anthropology from Britain and Europe.

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10. Name some of the early scholars who worked in the field of cultural anthropology from USA.

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1.3 SCOPE OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

You must be wondering, as you learn this subject, as to what is the scope of being a social or a cultural anthropologist? What are the areas of knowledge that this subject touches upon? You will be happy to know that social/cultural anthropology has one of the widest scope as compared to any other subject, for it deals directly with the human situation. If we study ourselves as *human beings*, this is the subject that we rely upon. In anthropology, humans are treated as a totality and not simply as a body (medical science) or a mind (psychology) or as an animal species (zoology). Of course there are subjects like history and geography that come close to cultural anthropology, but they too do not deal with all aspects of being human. Thus as a cultural anthropologist, you will study history but it need not only be the written or documented history that historians usually rely upon, but it will include what we call as oral history and ethno-history. Anthropologists take people as their primary subject of study, for them it is more important to know the people's version of history for it is this version that motivates and triggers action. People act according to their beliefs and ethno-history or the people's version of their history is what is going to predict how people will behave. Anthropologists are not concerned with what is documented and followed by the academic community but what is believed in and followed by the common people at large. It is the latter version that determines the course of history and shapes collective human action.

It must be noted that anthropology does not focus on the individual like the psychologists, they are only interested in the collective and the public domain. Both society and culture are in the realm of the total society and although shared, do not refer to individual characters or propensities. The relation of individuals to society, in the sense that how the individual is shaped by society, and how the individuals through their actions and behaviour reproduce society is a matter of concern for anthropologists. For example humans do not mate they marry, in other words, who they choose as their partner is largely determined by their cultural conditioning, even when one assumes that there is a free choice. For example in the American society, marriage is supposed to be determined by free individual choice but actual study of marriages indicate that majority of marriages rarely take place across the racial and even the class divide. But at the same time, as society is changing the values with respect to inter-racial marriage is also changing, thus social and cultural changes often accompany each other. In the USA for example, the election of a black president, the changes in perception due to urbanisation and education and the generally liberal attitudes of some parts of the USA has led to a sea change in patterns of marriage (Bialik 2017). Data from the few research centers indicates that there has been a more than five- fold increase from 3% in 1967 to 17% among all newlyweds towards inter-racial marriage pattern in 2015. Among all married people in 2015, 10% show inter-racial marriage. Of course the occurrence of 10% marriage shows that for a long time, people in USA did not marry across the race divide that is only picking up in recent times. Yet the very figures indicate that cultural prejudices do come in the way of a society being truly open, even when it is ideologically so. Anthropologists are by training immensely suited to investigate the occurrence of such inhibitions in an open society, where there exist no legal or social barriers to inter-marriage. The facts also indicate that change is occurring. Anthropologists would engage in studying both the initial existence of the prejudices and also analysing the deeper causes of changes, when they occur.

Cultural anthropologists would look for the changing meanings of marriage, the changing colour symbols and changes in values and ideology. The social anthropologists would look for structural changes, the changing economic and power equations and transforming hierarchies. The election of a black president in the US indicates both changes in social hierarchies and power structures as well it indicates cultural transformations of values. This is not to say that there is such a division of labour between social and cultural anthropologists as most scholars would look for all these factors. Thus we prefer to use the combined term social/cultural anthropology in recent times than emphasise upon one or the other.

Social anthropology focuses generally upon aspects of society such as social stratification, studies of social institutions such as those pertaining to economy, politics, religion and law. A major aspect of social anthropological studies is that pertaining to kinship, family and marriage. The classical works of these kinds were the books; *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*, *African Political Systems*, *Witchcraft among the Azande*, *The Nuers*, *Nuer Religion* and so on. Social anthropologists also studied change and various types of social transformations. With the incorporation of Marxism into anthropology, the aspect of history was also covered in anthropological analysis.

Cultural anthropologists were able to venture into many more directions, the American school gave rise to ecological anthropology, psychological anthropology, medical anthropology, linguistic anthropology, historical anthropology and now we have many more branches of anthropology, like enterprise anthropology, anthropology of women, anthropology of tourism, anthropology of disaster and risk management and any

other numbers of fields into which anthropologists now venture. In every case the anthropologists try to bring their methodology of qualitative, in depth analysis and data collection into each of these aspects of human existence. Where we compete with already existing disciplines like psychology and history, the anthropologists justify their existence by their method.

Psychological anthropologists differ from psychologists in that while psychologists believe that the human brain and mind are similar in all human beings and that classical psychological studies treated all human minds as alike, psychological anthropology investigates the relationship between the individual mind and culture (Bourguignon 1979). According to the founders of the culture and personality school, that led to the formation of psychological anthropology as a sub-discipline of social/cultural anthropology, if we accept Freud's theory of early childhood experiences affecting adult personality, then since different cultures practice different child rearing practices, there is going to be a collective cultural influence on all children brought up in the same culture, that will give rise to some collective personality traits in persons subjected to the similar process of enculturation. For example practices such as feeding, weaning, toilet training and sleep patterns of infants are largely conditioned by cultural norms. For example in South Asia, most children sleep with their mothers and are carried in the lap or back of parents and adult care givers. In American society on the other hand, even infants are put in a separate room and bed and are carried in strollers and almost never in the lap. These fundamental differences in the handling of the child are likely to produce differences in adult personality. Contemporary psychologists too have begun to incorporate the concept of cross-cultural personality traits in their work (see Schwartz, White and Lutz 1992).

Reflection

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) proposed the *psychoanalytic theory* (psyche = the mind and analysis = looking at the parts of the mind individually to see how they relate). It is the first theory that describes the stages of development through childhood. The basic premise of the theory is that the biological urges move an individual through a series of stages that is responsible for shaping one's personality.

Freud had given his theory of early childhood personality development based on what he considered universal human traits largely biologically determined. According to Freud three stages are involved particularly, oral, anal and oedipal and get resolved by cultural means such as weaning, toilet training and cultural interpretation of parenthood.

Eminent social anthropologists John Beattie has written that "Social anthropologists in fact concern themselves with three different levels of data; (i) 'what actually happens', (ii) 'what people think happens' and (iii) what they think ought to happen, their legal and moral values" (Beattie c.f. Moore and Sanders 2006: 149). Thus the first is often established by statistical analysis like the example of inter-racial marriage that we have already talked about. Anthropologists will not be satisfied by such mere statement of data. They now go into the details of social interaction between the different 'races', their norms and values of interaction, even their history and context. They would as cultural anthropologists examine the symbolic significance of race and the moral aspects. A lot about these interactions would depend on how people interpret and understand the institution of marriage. Thus anthropologists engage in multi-faceted analysis taking various dimensions of a phenomenon into account.

Check Your Progress 3

11. State the subject matter of Social Anthropology.

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12. State the subject matter of Cultural Anthropology.

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1.4 THE RELEVANCE OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

It is also accepted in anthropological theory that the real social conditions do not show up on the surface but are at deeper layers below the visible reality, and to look for the real reasons, one may have to go deeper. This is the reason that anthropological methods require long term and engaged study of a particular situation or ‘field’. This in-depth study is mostly qualitative in nature where one engages with real human beings rather than just rely on secondary data or statistics. This is where anthropologists differ significantly from economists, as to them concepts like poverty are not just statistical figures but relate to real people, their lives and their real life conditions. Anthropologists tend to put a face on the facts that they present.

The ethnographic method, as the anthropological method of doing a holistic study of a specific area, is called, often uses as data, personal narratives, life histories and face to face interviews with real people. It also involves the anthropologist going and staying for long periods of time with the people who are being studied and whose lives are then shared by them. This is known in anthropological language as ‘going native’. Thus anthropological fieldwork involves the subjective interaction of the anthropologist with the field that can no longer be viewed as an object. The subjectivities of the informants and that of the anthropologist form an interaction where the subjective self of the anthropologist cannot be ignored. In other words the anthropologist is not the passive, objective, scientific observer of the laboratory situation; he or she is a living human being in contact with other human beings and thus his or her emotions and sentiments remain alive. The fieldwork situation is an interaction of one human being with others and therefore there is a cognitive and perceptual element from both sides. The very presence of the anthropologist transforms the field as others begin to interact with the scholar, who becomes situated in the field, as a part of it (Clifford and Marcus 1990). This very subjectivity, the lack of so-called scientific objectivity is the hall mark of the anthropological method.

Such close interactions with the human beings often bring out data that would never be accessible by any superficial or short term methods. The scope of anthropology thus extends to every dimension of human life but in a way that these areas are accessed with humane concern and empathy. The anthropologists thus find themselves as advocates for the people they study, representing them and fighting for them at various forums. The anthropologists’ immersion in the field, gives them an empathetic

relationship with them, so that they often end up thinking like them. Thus the scholar also becomes an activist or he or she applies the knowledge that they have gained for the good of the people who they begin to identify as their own. Most anthropologists refer to their informants as ‘my people’; often forming a lifelong relationship with them.

The most important contribution of anthropology as a discipline is to learn to move beyond what is known as ‘ethno-centrism’. Since all human beings are enculturated into a particular way of life, it is also very common for people to get into the mindset that their way of life is the best way. Even if people are not consciously thinking in these terms we get used to accepting some things as ‘normal’ and it is very difficult for us to move beyond this comfort zone of what we consider the appropriate way of living. Many kinds of cultural practices and habits appear ‘disgusting’, ‘shocking’ or strange to some people while they may be perfectly acceptable and ‘normal’ for those who practice them. Thus eating dogs, men wearing skirts, women shaving their heads, marriages of infants, female infanticide etc. are practices that may shock or produce disgust in those who may not be used to them.

Anthropologists on the other hand are trained to stretch their power of acceptance to stretched limits where, even if they may not bring themselves to practice these customs, can at least try to justify them for people who do, for example read Felix Padel’s (2011) work on human sacrifice among the Kondh tribes of Orissa, where even if not exactly supporting the custom, he shows how the practice itself was distorted and blown out of proportion by the British administrators who used this data to project the Kondhs as ‘primitive’ and barbaric. He also demonstrates through the use of archival and field data, how the British intervention in this matter and their ruthless persecution of the tribals was far more savage and caused far more human misery than was ever caused by the actual practice of human sacrifice.

Thus a primary work of anthropologists is to investigate the real data, to go beyond stereotypes and prejudices to analyse with an open mind. To the anthropologists, there are societies and there are cultures. They are also now strongly committed to the value of not judging any cultural or social practice and to only understand things in their own context. This moving beyond ethnocentrism towards a universal humanism is now the hallmark of being an anthropologist. As students of anthropology you must also learn to be non-judgmental, to appreciate diversity and to understand that humans live according to their culture and cultures are not genetic, but acquired as members of divergent societies. It is a human trait that we are diverse in our ways of life and the relevance of anthropology which is a human as well as a humane science is to understand this diversity and learn to respect it. Anthropologists are extremely respectful of the ways of other people and they are also making all efforts to extend this appreciation to others, so that more and more people are able to understand the relevance and need of cultural diversity and tolerance for ways not their own.

Check Your Progress 4

13. Describe the term ‘going native’.

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14. What is subjectivity?

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15. Suggest any two relevance of studying anthropology.

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1.5 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learnt the basics about the discipline of social and cultural anthropology. The student had been told the difference as well as the integral relationship between society and culture and how both of these are a hall mark of our existence as humans on this earth. Without culture there are no humans and without society there can be no culture as it is behaviour, values and practices that we learn only as members of society and society cannot be reproduced as a set of enduring relationships if people did not behave according to the cultural norms. Thus social groups such as caste, tribe and ethnic groups reproduce themselves through the institutions of marriage. But people are culturally conditioned to marry in a way that they reproduce their societies.

We have learnt how anthropology as a discipline has got a wide scope as anthropological methods and methodology, is capable of understanding almost any phenomenon pertaining to human society and human behaviour. Thus religion, politics, philosophy, psychology and economics are all within the purview of anthropology, except that anthropology approaches these dimensions of society in a manner quite different from those adopted classically in the disciplines of say, psychology, economics and political science. Today many of them including historians are adopting what we understand as the ethnographic method. Fieldwork or the gathering of data from people directly is something that psychologists, cultural geographers and historians are also doing. Social and cultural anthropologists have the unique ability to communicate across cultures and this does not just mean speaking the same language but it means that they are able to break down the cognitive barrier that usually exists between persons of different cultures or even class and community background. In the next unit we will explore the history and development of social and cultural anthropology.

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1.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. refer to section 1.1.
2. refer to section 1.1.
3. refer to section 1.1.
4. No.
5. refer to para 6 of section 1.1.
6. refer to section 1.1.
7. refer to section 1.2.
8. refer to section 1.2.
9. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Bronislaw Malinowski, Raymond Firth and others.
10. Franz Boas, Alfred Kroeber, Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Ruth Bunzel, Darryl Forde, Melville Herskovits, Ralph Linton and others.
11. refer to section 1.3 paragraph four.

Nature and Scope

12. refer to section 1.3 paragraph five.
13. refer to section 1.4 paragraph two.
14. refer to section 1.4.
15. refer to section 1.4.