UNIT 12  FIELDWORK TRADITIONS IN ANTHROPOLOGY

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this unit you will learn about the:
➢ genesis of fieldwork in social/cultural anthropology;
➢ contributions of A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and Bronislaw K. Malinowski in developing fieldwork traditions in social/cultural anthropology; and
➢ how the concept of field has changed in the twenty-first century.

12.0  INTRODUCTION

Social anthropology is an observational, comparative and generalising science. The meaning of the statement is given below: (1) data are collected by making use of the techniques of observation on a smaller unit (say a society, community, neighborhood, group, or an institution); (2) from this study, propositions about the entire society are abstracted; social anthropology is understood as an inductive science of society, where we move from the particular to the general; (3) in addition, data from different societies are meticulously subjected to comparison to find out the commonalities and differences among different societies, or the units on which the study is being conducted; and (4) an attempt is made to arrive at a set of generalisations about the unit of study.

At one time, these generalisations attempted from a comparative study were called ‘laws’ (that is, the ‘laws of the working of society’). Today, the word ‘law’ has been dropped, mainly because it is realised that the kind of laws that we are able to derive at in natural and biological sciences are not possible for social sciences. Human behaviour has a great deal of variability than what one finds in natural and biological phenomena. However, the idea of arriving at ‘what is common to all the units under study’ continues.
In this unit, we would try to understand the need of fieldwork in anthropology. The history of how from arm-chair anthropology we moved on to the field where the day-to-day activities of the human beings were observed and recorded through fieldwork would be a part of this unit. We would also take into account how fieldwork and field is conceptualised in the twenty-first century and the ethical concerns in the field that an anthropologist encounters.

### 12.1 CRITICISM OF ARM-CHAIR ANTHROPOLOGY

In the formative era of anthropology, those of our scholars who did not carry out any empirical study themselves but wholly relied on the information that was collected by the others (such as travelers, missionaries, army personnel, photojournalists, etc.), often haphazardly, were rather derogatorily termed the ‘arm-chair anthropologists’. It meant that rather than confronting the reality themselves, they were just imagining it to be what they thought was logically possible, or could have been possible at one time, by basing them on the biased, exaggerated, and prejudiced pieces of information that were gathered by unskilled, lay persons. Often, their purpose was to shock the western world with the existence of odd and peculiar practices of the non-western people.

Once the tradition of the ‘arm-chair anthropology’ was rejected, the approach that came up was to study a society first-hand. It meant that the anthropologist was also the data-collector, not just an analyst and interpreter of the information that hitherto had been gathered.

Thus, today anthropologists collect their data from real societies, by living with the people in their natural habitats, and then, they analyze and interpret the data thus collected to have an understanding of the structure and function of society. This knowledge is also essential for bringing about any kind of change in society. We must know what the reality is – what the society is like – before we think in terms of the changes that are likely to be introduced. It was noted in the past that many programmes of change and many innovative projects (some of which seemed to be promising) were rejected by people because these were not in line with the customs and practices of the people and did not reflect their aspirations and demands. Thus, people found the proposed changes, and those that were being introduced, alien to them and rejected them without hesitation. On finding people unresponsive, in some cases, the state and the change-producing agencies thought that the people were inert and passive, and were unaware of the long-term benefits of the change, and thus would accept the changes and innovations only when these were imposed on them, sometimes forcibly. In some such cases coercion was regarded as a reasonable method of making people change.

It was strongly opposed by the anthropologists who thought that changes were rejected because they were introduced without the knowledge of the social life of the people, their pressing needs and requirements, which unless addressed to would lead to a situation where the best programmes introduced with the best intent were destined to rejection.
1. ‘The arm chair anthropologists were fieldworkers.’ State whether the statement is true or false.

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2. Define fieldwork.

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12.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF FIELDWORK

Against this backdrop, the best way to know people and their reality, which has become central to social anthropological work, is fieldwork. Incidentally, one of the main contributions of social anthropology to the other fields of knowledge, not only in social but also in natural and biological sciences, is in terms of the methodology of fieldwork. Today, the other disciplines have introduced courses on fieldwork in their curricula and are learning the art, lore and science of fieldwork from anthropologists.

In this connection we may quote Henri Bergson, who said, ‘there are two ways of knowing a phenomenon, one by going round it, and the other by going inside it.’ The methodology of fieldwork argues in favour of going inside a phenomenon and understanding it from within, what is known as the “insider’s view”. Fieldwork is a method of data collection in which the investigator lives with the people in their natural habitat and learns from within by becoming a member of that society. We have also realised the difference that exists between ‘what people think’, ‘what people say’, ‘what people do’, and ‘what they think they ought to have done’. If we are just asking them questions and noting down their replies, as happens in the method called ‘survey’, we are largely collecting information on ‘what people say they do’. It is highly likely that they may not be doing what they are saying. They may be giving the normatively correct and socially desirable replies. In other words, what they are saying may not be the truth. We have on record many cases of this type. For instance, a respondent, a pharmacist by profession, may be boasting of his adherence to the value of honesty, but the anthropologist living in his house finds out that the same man is in fact stealing medicines from the hospital where he is working and selling them to his clients whom he is treating illegally. This is what John Beattie found out in his study of the Bunyoro. We shall come to know what the reality is when we live with people for a considerable period of time and come face-to-face with their actual ways of living and not the ones they describe, which may be an ‘ideal’ way, or what they think should be the right way of living.

Check Your Progress 2

2. Define fieldwork.

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12.3 HISTORY OF FIELDWORK

The methodology of fieldwork has evolved over time with its own rules and procedures. Initially, as we learned previously, anthropology was not field-oriented.
The speedy growth of anthropology took place after the publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. The anthropologists were inspired for the study of the evolution of society and culture, from its beginning. Thus, the first approach in anthropology was the evolutionary approach, which was concerned with the evolution of society, its institutions and their forms, answering the questions like why these institutions came into existence (the issue of origin) and what were the stages through which they passed to reach its contemporary form (the sequence of evolution).

As said earlier, the early scholars, who later identified them as anthropologists, relied rather uncritically upon the information available in travel accounts and administrative reports. It may be a little surprising to note that it did not occur to many of them that they should have also visited societies in the non-western world before writing on them, although some of them (like Edward Tylor, Lewis Morgan) did visit the communities of the so-called ‘primitive people’. E.B. Tylor (1832-1917) a British anthropologist and an advocate of the theory of human development (evolutionism) assisted an amateur archaeologist in his field expedition to Mexico in the mid 1850s. In 1861, Tylor published his first work *Anahuac, or Mexico and the Mexicans, Ancient and Modern* based on this fieldwork. L.H. Morgan (1818-1881), an American anthropologist working on evolutionism and a contemporary of Tylor, gave us the concept of kinship. He worked among the Iroquois while working on legal matters regarding the Iroquois and published his findings in the book called *League of the Iroquois* in 1851.

Travels to the unknown parts of the world began from the fourteenth century. With the passage of time, and with an improvement in travel facility, these visits started increasing in number and so did the travel accounts. The earlier anthropologists took these materials into account for building up their theories of origin and evolution. In other words, they did not carry out any first hand study among these communities.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, museums were gradually developing. In all these museums was added a section on the ethnology of people. For collecting objects of material culture, which might be housed in museums, many excursions were organised and sent to the tribal areas. Their job was not only to collect the material things but also to provide a write up on each of the material objects thus collected. In this way, under the garb of museum excursions, some kind of fieldwork came into existence. British anthropologists like W.H.R. Rivers (1864-1922) and A.C. Haddon (1855-1940) carried out field expedition to the Torres Straits in the Pacific, in Australia in 1898; while American anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942) did his fieldwork among the Eskimos in Baffin Island, Canada in 1883.

By the close of the nineteenth century, the evolutionary approach came under sharp criticisms, for not collecting the facts itself but rather relying upon the travel accounts. The evolutionary theory was criticised for the paucity of data and hence the need was to collect first hand data about cultural facts. A general dissatisfaction with evolutionary theory surfaced when it was demonstrated that many of the institutions of modern societies were also found among the primitive people. For instance, monogamy and nuclear family were found in simple societies also. Therefore, how could one say that these institutions had evolved over time, from promiscuity and group marriage as Morgan believed?

All these factors led to an important shift in the approach of the anthropologists. Rather than relying upon the travel accounts, the anthropologist preferred to carry
out a firsthand study of the people and learn the culture the way it was led and understood by its bearers. Once fieldwork came into existence, it became the hallmark of the anthropological work.

**Check Your Progress 3**

3. Name the anthropologist who assisted an amateur archaeologist in his field expedition to Mexico.

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4. Who authored the work *League of the Iroquois* in 1851?

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5. Name the British anthropologist who carried out fieldwork in the Torres Straits.

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6. Which anthropologist worked among the Eskimos of Baffin Islands?

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**12.4 CONTRIBUTIONS OF ALFRED REGINALD RADCLIFFE-BROWN AND BRONISLAW KASPER MALINOWSKI**

One of the first well known field studies was A.R. Brown’s work on the Andaman Islanders. Brown, who later became Radcliffe-Brown, spent two years (from 1906-08) with these people and wrote his master’s dissertation, submitted in 1910, based on the information he had collected. Although it was largely a functional study, that is to say it was an account of how Andamanese society was an integrated whole, it also had several instances where the author looked at how cultural traits had diffused. In other words, Brown’s work was also concerned with diffusionism and the reason for this was that he was a student of W.H.R. Rivers, who was one of the famous diffusionists of his times. Brown’s fieldwork was not exemplary, but he definitely showed that a first-hand study of society was essential to dispel all beliefs about the people that the evolutionists had held.
The person who laid down the premises of fieldwork was Bronislaw Malinowski, a scholar of Polish origin, who studied anthropology under C.G. Seligman. He carried out a piece of intensive fieldwork with Trobriand Islanders. He spent close to thirty-one months with these people from August 1914 to March 1915, and then from May 1915 to May 1916, and then, the last stint of fieldwork from October 1917 to October 1918. In 1922 was published his *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, a book that provided an analysis of the system of different kinds of exchanges in the Trobriand society. Malinowski lived in the midst of the people; he pitched his tent in the village of Omarakana, and collected all his information by learning the language the people spoke. Brown, on the other hand, mainly collected his data with the aid of translators and interpreters. Malinowski, in his writings, always maintained the importance of learning the local language of the people, for the cultural concepts of the people cannot be grasped without knowing their language. Later, from Malinowski’s account of how fieldwork should be carried out, based on how he carried out his own fieldwork with the Trobriand Islanders, the following principles may be noted:

1. The ethnographer should observe the same kind of behaviour over a length of time and should also observe it occurring at different points of time. He should not just rely upon its solitary instance, for it may be atypical. The objective of this rule is to rule out any atypical element or idiosyncrasy in social action. Our job is to understand whether a particular type of behaviour is typical in the society or is highly personal. Our interest is not in the individual, but in understanding the collective behaviour of the community. That is why the same type of behaviour must be observed over a length of time to discover the common features that exist in all its instances. This is called the method of ‘concrete, statistical documentation’ of human action.

2. The early travelers, who came from the western world to the areas of the so-called ‘primitive’ people, laid their eyes upon the study of the oddities, strange customs, and manners, which their cultures did not have. They were mainly interested in identifying the differences between these people and the westerners. Thus, it was obvious that they did not pay any attention to the everyday life of the people. In comparison to this approach of “selective study”, it was argued that we should study the everyday life of people, the things which are generally taken for granted. Our job is to study the entire society, the relationship between its different parts and the way they all function together. Therefore, the need is to know the whole, rather than some of its parts, which excite interest among the visitors. The advice is to study each and every aspect of the society rather than those which appear peculiar and strange.

3. Malinowski stated that the ethnographer lives in the village, or the site of his study, with ‘no other business but to follow native life’, to observe it as closely as possible, the ‘customs, ceremonies and transactions over and over again’. There are several phenomena that cannot be recorded by questioning them but have to be observed as they take place. For example, Malinowski includes in this list the “routine of a man’s working day, the details of the care of his body, of the manner of taking food and preparing it, the tone of conversational and social life around the village fires”, etc. These occurrences, which Malinowski calls the ‘imponderabilia of social life’, needs to be observed, their subtleness needs to be meticulously recorded.

4. We should note down the exact words in which people communicate their thoughts, ideas and beliefs. These ‘ethnographic statements, characteristic
narratives, typical utterances, items of folklore, and magical formulae’ should
be recorded as a whole. The collection of these constitutes what Malinowski
calls a ‘corpus inscriptionism’, which guides us to the understanding of the
‘mentality’ of people. Each word needs to be culturally understood and analysed.
Language is the mirror of culture.

5. The objective of an anthropological investigation, Malinowski (1922) says, is
to ‘grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of
his world’. Each culture has its own set of values, the ways of doing things, and
it gives a distinct meaning to the lives of people; in other words, the hold of
each culture on the lives of its people is different. If we look at this as an
outsider—from an outsider’s perspective—we shall never be able to understand
it, for our values would come into play, and we would end up providing a
biased and prejudiced view. Thus, the anthropologist has to step inside the
‘heads of the people’ under study and understand it from ‘inside’.

**Activity**

To understand the essence of observation you can carry out your own
observations, for example, while travelling by bus/metro/train observe how
people behave. How they interact with each other or don’t interact. How
people converse on the phone in public places. Note down the different
types of behaviour you observe.

Malinowski laid down the basic premises of fieldwork. For a long time, he provided
training in how fieldwork should be carried out. His disciples carried out the same
brand of fieldwork, a lengthy period of stay with people in their natural habitat with
an attempt to understand their institutions and points of view. Gradually, fieldwork
based on Malinowski’s example became central to today’s anthropology. Although
Malinowski did not coin the term ‘participant observation’, his entire work dealt
with observing people by trying to participate as much as was possible in their day-
to-day life.

**Check Your Progress 4**

7. Where did A.R. Radcliffe-Brown conduct one of the first well known field
studies?

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8. Who was Malinowski’s mentor?

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9. ‘Learning the local language during fieldwork is not required.’ State whether
this statement is true or false.

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12.5 FIELDWORK IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

Till now we have been discussing how fieldwork emerged in anthropological studies, its relevance and importance. Let us now see if we are still following the traditional patterns of conducting fieldwork. Within anthropological studies, with the passage of time and the changes that have taken place, fieldwork has undergone a lot of changes.

Field today no longer means going off on an expedition to a far off place or living among the natives. The field itself is fast changing. In this era of globalisation, rarely would we find a society in its pristine form or living on its own in absolute seclusion. Anthropologists, though primarily concerned with the lesser known societies, are also taking into consideration the developed and the developing societies. Today anthropological fieldwork takes into account not only the ‘others’ but also the ‘self’, as anthropologists are now writing about their lived experiences. In today’s scenario, the field could be an institution, an organisation in which the focus of anthropologists is on the work culture and behavioural patterns. The field can be a rural or an urban site.

Owing to the ethical issues that have emerged in the work of the colonial fieldworkers, many of the native anthropologists have taken it upon themselves to restudy and study their own societies. Thus, anthropologists today are also working among one’s own people. The virtual space is also a matter of concern for the anthropologists today, as human beings are carrying out much of their activities online. The virtual world has thus become a field for the anthropologists. Fieldwork can be multi-sited too. In multi-sited fieldwork the researcher conducts fieldwork in more than one site where the subjects can be found. Serena Nanda’s work on the Hijras in India is a classic example of multi-sited fieldwork where she took into account the Hijras living in different parts of India. A recent trend in anthropological fieldwork is researching the ‘self’ known as auto-ethnography, where the fieldworker narrates the lived experiences of his/her life.

Check Your Progress 5

10. Name some of the spaces in the twenty-first century where fieldwork is being conducted.

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12. ‘Fieldwork is possible in the virtual space.’ State whether this statement is true or false.

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12.6 ETHICS IN FIELDWORK

Ethics basically are the moral principles that govern a person’s behaviour towards the self and others while performing an activity.

Anthropological fieldwork involves interactions with human beings where at times the researcher has to deal with sensitive data or information. Ethical issues are thus a major concern in anthropological fieldwork. The problem might begin with the selection of topic right till the presentation of the data in the form of a written report or a dissertation. Today, for example, while clicking a photograph it can also lead to an ethical issue of whether the consent of the person involved had been taken or not. Fieldwork is a part of a researcher’s way of gathering information and it is the fieldworker who in a way intrudes into the lives of the people. Thus, a researcher has to be very diligent with how data have to be collected and disseminated. While in field the researcher needs to take into account four basic attributes related to data collection: a. confidentiality of sensitive issues which needs to be protected; b. consent of the people under study before embarking on data collection; c. utility concerns on the use of the data for the betterment of the community and the society at large; and d. knowledge and its transmission that involves the rights of the community under study as the patent for their indigenous knowledge while maintaining the authenticity of the data.

Check Your Progress 6

12. ‘Anthropologists need to take consent while taking photographs and video recording interviews.’ State whether this statement is true or false.

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12.7 SUMMARY

Anthropology is a field based subject. The sub-discipline called social/cultural anthropology has got methods of study in which fieldwork plays a very important role. In the beginning of anthropological studies, scholars known as arm-chair anthropologists depended on accounts brought in by the travelers, adventurers, etc., about the different groups of people and culture they came across in different parts of the world. Scholars built theories on the basis of such information. It was gradually felt that information with direct contact with the people produced fruitful result for the study of society and culture and for any change to be brought in. Scientific methodology for fieldwork developed from the end of nineteenth century. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and B. Malinowski contributed greatly for the development of proper methods and techniques for data collection in the field, analysis of data and application of the result for betterment of the society. Methods of investigation in social/cultural anthropology are developing day by day. In the next unit, we will discuss how to conduct fieldwork. The steps involved right from the time of inception of an idea for a topic of study, to the types of preparation required for going to the field, conducting fieldwork and finally disseminating the results in the form of a report or dissertation.
12.8 REFERENCES


12.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. False
2. See section 12.2 for details
3. E.B. Tylor
4. L.H. Morgan
5. W.H.R. Rivers and A.C. Haddon
6. Franz Boas
7. Andaman Islands
8. C.G Seligman
9. False
10. See section 12.5.
12. True
12. True.