UNIT 4  FIELDWORK TRADITIONS IN ANTHROPOLOGY

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Learning Outcomes

After reading this unit, the student will learn to:
- Define the concept of anthropology as a field science;
- Explain the criticisms of arm-chair anthropology;
- Attempt the initiation of fieldwork in anthropology;
- Discuss the relevance of anthropological fieldwork;
- Describe field in the twenty first century; and
- Evaluate the importance of ethics in fieldwork.

4.0. INTRODUCTION

This unit will reflect on how investigation of data in anthropology began. For data to be investigated the first step is data collection. In anthropology data collection begins with fieldwork. Fieldwork is an essential part of being an anthropologist as s/he is involved in first hand contact and data collection from the informants. This unit will provide the genesis of fieldwork in anthropology- its initiation, relevance and importance that makes anthropology a ‘field science’. The core theme of this unit would be to explore the reasons why anthropology is known as a field science, how the tradition of collecting first-hand information through direct contact with the informants developed in anthropology, and the significance and relevance of fieldwork in the present world. You may also read BANC 102 Unit 11 which also deals with fieldwork traditions.

4.1  ARMCHAIR ANTHROPOLOGIST AND DATA COLLECTION

Anthropology, as you must have realised by now developed out of human curiosity to know what lies beyond the immediate horizons. As a discipline anthropology saw its origin in Europe and America that we refer to as the western world around

Contributor: Dr. Rukshana Zaman, Faculty, Discipline of Anthropology, School of Social Sciences, IGNOU
the early 18th century. During this time, human curiosity had led to the beginning of journeys to traverse the distance and find out more about the non-western world. The horizons were basically crossed by the travelers, the missionaries, the traders, the army personnel, administrators etc. These people brought back stories of their travels and interaction with people who were quite different in terms of culture and society. These stories became the data for the anthropologists during the formative era of anthropology. The source of data was never authenticated, leading to much imagination on the part of the anthropologist who tried to reproduce the lives of the people as they deemed logical. Such anthropologists who never went to the field or ever came in first-hand contact with the people under study were labelled as ‘armchair anthropologists’ by the later generations of anthropologists who initiated first-hand data collection.

First-hand data collection involves direct contact with the informants. The works of the armchair anthropologists were thus, criticised as “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” (Srivastava, 2020:148). As Srivastava has rightly pointed out, the information the armchair anthropologists collected through second hand sources were more of distorted stories of the people that were laced with creation of the ‘exotic other’ to shock the western world, rather than a detailed interpretation of their way of life. It was more deemed fit to be a coffee table work to be discussed with fellow men. The lack of first-hand contact with the people and non-validation of data proved futile for the armchair anthropologists. It became the reason for strong criticisms in the later years, as anthropology slowly grew in strength as a field science. Sir James Frazer’s work *Golden Bough* which was published in two volumes in 1890, three volumes in 1905 and twelve volumes in 1906-1915 reflects the work of an armchair anthropologist who never directly visited the field.

Check Your Progress

1. “Armchair anthropologists collected first-hand data”. State whether the following statement is either true or false.

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2. What were the sources of data for the armchair anthropologists?

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3. Who authored *Golden Bough*?
4.2 INITIATION OF FIELDWORK

As we say ‘Rome was not built in a day’ so is the case with systematic and organised anthropological fieldwork. Anthropology as a discipline had to go through various attempted field trips to be recognised as a ‘field science’. In Herbert Spencer’s work *Social Statics*, 1851: 63 the term evolution was used to explain ‘progress’ that set the ball rolling for the anthropologists to work on evolution of society. This work was published much before the publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, 1859, (Carneiro, 2003: 3) which was a turning point for other disciplines to understand the concept of evolution. Thus, evolutionary approach came up in the anthropological studies mainly concerning evolution of societies, institutions and their forms, how societies moved from the stages of barbarism, hunting gathering and finally reached the stage of civilisation. The information for such data mainly came from the travelers’ accounts. It would be a misnomer at this juncture to state that the classical anthropologists did not venture out to the field. Attempts were made to carry out fieldwork, however, these were amateur attempts and they heavily relied more on traveler accounts and historical assumptions than on studying the communities and societies first-hand.

Edward Burnette 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. However, Tylor is reckoned more with giving the anthropological world one of the most well-known definition of culture in his work *Primitive Culture* (1891). The work was based on information gathered through secondary sources. Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881), an American anthropologist working on evolutionism and a contemporary of Tylor, gave us the concept of kinship and social structure. He worked among the Iroquois, while working on their legal matters, who were practically living in his backyard, and published his findings in the book called *League of the Iroquois* in 1851. Morgan a lawyer by profession, later carried out field studies among many other North American tribes and their kinship systems. Based on his findings Morgan was one of the first to propose that the earliest domestic institutions were matrilineal clans and not the patrilineal families. Morgan’s work on kinship housed kinship studies within the domain of anthropological purview, that was later borrowed by sociology and other social sciences.

The reckoning of fieldwork within the discipline of anthropology came with the famous Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Strait Islands in the Pacific, Australia, that went up to New Guinea and Borneo in 1898. The team was led by Alfred Cort Haddon (1855-1940) who started his career as a biologist and finally moved on to anthropology and ethnology. W.H.R. Rivers, William McDougall, C.S. Myers, Sidney H. Ray, Anthony Wilkin, and C. G. Seligman were the scholars who made the team. The aim of the expedition was to record the societies and their belief structures. This field expedition is also reckoned for recording of audio data in terms of music and songs, still photography
and filming. Haddon’s contribution to Haptic cinematography emanates from this expedition which has left a mark in anthropology. William Halsey Rivers trained as a physician, moved on to psychology and finally became rooted to anthropology with the Torres Strait expedition. He later went on to study the Todas of Southern India. His work gave the genealogical method to anthropology, which is still reflected upon by the present generations of anthropologists.

Franz Boas (1858-1942) an American anthropologist around the same time carried out his first fieldwork among the Inuit of the Baffin Island, Canada in 1883. Boas owing to his strong belief in first hand data collection, denounced and strongly criticised the methods used by the armchair anthropologists. He propagated the study of a society for its relevance in the present meaning ‘here and now’. This concept of looking at a society through its own lens rather than judging it on the basis of a comparison with other societies came to be known as cultural relativism. Boas emphasised on understanding the culture of a society in relevance to its present context and thereby reconstruct the history. He accentuated that cultures cannot be ranked on a scale, and vehemently opposed the idea of the objective notion of one society being superior or inferior to another. Boas argued that the history along with its growth and evolution of a society needed to be investigated in its present relevance to interpret and complete the picture. Boas argued that historical particularism took into account the growth of ideas with much greater accuracy than the generalisation of the comparative method that was being used by the classical anthropologists (Hyatt 990:43). Boas accentuated that archaeological, physical, cultural and linguistic aspects need to be taken into account simultaneously while studying a culture. He was the first one to work on all the four branches of anthropology that later became popular in the 20th century. Boas was a visionary who also worked with images. During his study of the Kwakiutl’s Winter ceremony at Tsaxis he collected visual data and the publication ‘The Kwakiutl of Vancouver Island’ 1909 included 173 figures and 26 plates. Boas with his insight on fieldwork for anthropological investigations was reckoned as the Father of American anthropology.

Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown’s work on the Andaman Islanders was also based on field study. He spent almost two years in the field (1906-08) for his Master’s dissertation which he submitted in 1910. Brown’s work concentrated largely on the everyday functioning of the activities in the field and looked at it from a functional point of view. However, as a student of W.H.R. Rivers he also looked into the aspects of diffusion of cultural traits. Though his work could not leave a mark in the academic world in terms of fieldwork, yet he showed the importance of fieldwork in understanding a society.

The reckoning of fieldwork as a method in anthropology is credited to Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942). A Polish anthropologist Malinowski studied social anthropology in Britain under the tutelage of C.G. Seligman. He is known for his intensive fieldwork carried out in Trobriand Island. He pitched his tent right in the middle of the village and lived in the midst of the people for nearly thirty-one months from August 1914-March 1915, again May 1915-May 1916 and finally from October 1917 to October 1918. Malinowski laid the foundation for extended stay in the field. Malinowski not only set a bench mark with his long-extended stay in the field, but also laid emphasis on the importance of the use of local language to communicate with the informants. He learned the language to communicate with the people and participated in the day to day activities of the
people under study to become a part of the community. Communicating in the local language and participating in the everyday activities of the community helped in creating an understanding of the field situation that led to the insider’s eye. In *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski has vividly described that the objective of the anthropological investigation is to, ‘grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, realize his vision of his world’ (1922:25). The role of the anthropologist is to present an emic (insider) rather than an etic (outsider) view, as Malinowski the researcher experienced the life of the informants first hand through participation. His work also directed at the importance of rapport building, how a researcher can gain inroads to the community through sharing and gaining trust among the respondents. From Malinowski’s work three premises were deduced for strengthening anthropological fieldwork, which today is its hallmark: a. long extended stay in the field, b. communicating in the native language and c. participant observation.

Malinowski in his work *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific* had stated that “one has to cut oneself off from the company of other white men, … camping right in their villages” (Malinowski, 1922: 6). This statement presumes that fieldwork was a men’s prerogative where women did not have a space. However, women did enter the field and have been working way before World War I, with Elsie Clews Parsons as one of the few women of her time who did fieldwork in the American Southwest in 1910. It was gradually held that women have more access to women respondents’ lives, a point which was advocated by E. B. Tylor in the 19th century itself who suggested that wives should assist their husbands for fieldwork to assist in such areas (Visweswaran, 1997). Boas too advocated this sentiment as he believed that “women had access to areas of social life men did not have; he considered women more intuitive and skilled in interpersonal relationships and urged them to collect data on the emotional expressive sides of life” (Modell, 1984: 181). A legacy that was carried forward by Boas’ students, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Cora Du Bois etc. all women who did their fieldwork in the 1920s and 30s and became leading anthropologists of their time. Mead’s work in Samoa was a breakthrough in the understanding of coming of age. Her work reflected on the culture that has an impact on teenagers and how the society has a role to play in growing up. Mary Douglas in the 1940s came to be reckoned for her fieldwork in the Congo on ritual purity and impurity and symbolism. Annette Weiner’s work on the Trobriand Islanders is quite remarkable as she brought out the women’s role and contribution in the economy that was widely missing in Malinowski’s work. Leela Dube’s work that brings to light the relationship between ‘women and kinship’ is recommendable as it presented the women’s perspective in a patriarchal society. Women anthropologists through their research have been able to bring out the notions of feminism and sexuality which has taken anthropological studies to a new realm.

**Check Your Progress**

4. Herbert Spencer in his work *Social Statics* used the term evolution. State whether the following statement is either true or false.

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5. Franz Boas emphasised on cultural relativism while conducting fieldwork. State whether the following statement is either true or false.

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6. Margaret Mead did not conduct fieldwork. State whether the following statement is either true or false.

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4.3 RELEVANCE OF FIELDWORK IN ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropology today in many ways have become synonym with ‘going to the field’ and ‘writing cultures/ethnography’. The authority and rhetoric have spread to many fields where ‘culture’ is a newly problematic object of description and critique (Clifford 1984:3) in the present era. Ethnography which stems from fieldwork, as a method, is now being widely borrowed by not only social sciences but also natural and biological sciences. The significance of fieldwork lies in the fact that it is conducted in a natural setting, data is collected first hand by a researcher who is continuously in touch with the informants, most times speaking the local language and through participant observation. “Anthropology is the naturalist’s trade: you sit and watch and learn from the species in its natural setting” (Luhrmann 1989:15).

The information thus gathered reflects on the views that give a first-hand description of an event or phenomena making it the insiders view (emic). This emic view gives authentication to data collected through fieldwork. It is a method that helps in distinguishing between; ‘what people think’, ‘what people say’, ‘what people do’, and ‘what people say they ought to have done’ (Srivastava 2004:11 and 2020: 149). Many a times people respond in a way that they feel is normatively correct and socially acceptable. For instance, a person might say we need to use a spoon while eating however, the reality might be that the person uses his/her fingers while eating. A researcher staying in the field and working alongside the informants, observing their behaviour gets a clear picture of what people say they do and what in reality they do. Reality is only exposed when a researcher is in close contact with the informants to investigate, validate and interpret the actual way of life which maybe is quite different from the ‘ideal’ or what one may think as the ideal way of living.

Check Your Progress

7. “Ethnography is based on insider’s view”. State whether the following statement is either true or false.

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4.4 FIELDWORK IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

By now the learners are quite aware that in anthropology there are four main branches. The essence of each of these branches lie in fieldwork. Herein, the question that arises is; “if the ‘field’ is same for all”? Let us think for a moment if the physical, social, linguistic and the archaeological anthropologists would go to the same field for data collection. We may argue that the space for fieldwork in terms of physical, social and the linguistic anthropologists would be same, as these branches deal with human origin, variation, behaviour and culture, however, the tools and techniques used for data collection would vary. The point of departure comes for the archaeological anthropologists as for them there is no direct interaction with human beings. So, what do they do? Archaeological anthropologist builds on the human story through an intensive study of the reminiscences found in material culture in order to reconstruct the past lives. Thus, for archaeological fieldwork the field is without living human informants.

The learners at this junction might remember from their earlier studies (Unit 11 of BANC 102 course) that today fieldwork is not merely associated with going off on an expedition to a faraway place or living among the ‘natives’. The very concept of field itself is fast changing. Anthropologists, though primarily concerned with the lesser known societies, are also taking into consideration the developed and the developing societies. Field today could be an institution, an organisation in which the focus of anthropologists is on corporate, business life, market trends etc. The media, performing arts, movies are all areas of interest for anthropologists. Health and well-being, genesis of diseases, the remains from the past cultures are being researched by physical and ethno-archaeologists. Field can either be a rural or an urban space. Anthropological fieldwork today pertains not only to the study of the ‘other’ but also the ‘self’ as anthropologists are now writing about their lived experiences through auto-ethnographic narratives. Thus, anthropologists today are also working among one’s own people. The virtual space has been in focus among anthropologists, human beings are now carrying out much of their activities online. The virtual world has thus become a field for the anthropologists. In earlier times fieldwork pertained to doing research at a particular site or space. Today fieldwork can be multi-sited too. In multi-sited fieldwork the researcher conducts fieldwork in more than one site where the same categories of subjects may be found. Thus, any space with human activities can be a potential field for anthropologists today- be it virtual or a geographical area.

The beginning of the third millennia, the year 2020 brought in a new phase in all our lives. The COVID 19 Pandemic saw an unusual situation where the normal everyday life was brought to a complete halt across the globe. Human beings were confined to their houses with the announcement of Lockdown and the norm
being social distancing. This was a time many felt would see the end of fieldwork tradition in the anthropological world. However, anthropologists across the globe turned their own houses and lives into the field. The anthropological gaze from the ‘other’ was turned completely to the ‘self’. Studying one’s family; interaction, behaviour, day to day life became the pattern. Many turned to the virtual world also and captured the movements in these spaces thus, retaining the fieldwork tradition under unusual circumstances. This has become a valid way of research as COVID 19 restrictions continue to exist.

**Check Your Progress**

9. Suggest some spaces where anthropological fieldwork can be carried out.

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10. “Virtual World is not a space for fieldwork”. State whether the following statement is either True or False.

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11. During the COVID 19 pandemic and the Lockdown period no fieldwork was conducted. State whether this statement is either True or False.

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**4.5 ETHICS IN FIELDWORK**

Let us try to understand what ethics implies with an example. If you are walking in the street and you find a hundred rupee note, what would you do? Say you pick it up and put it in your pocket. Will this be ethically correct? Herein some may argue that it is not ethical to take what does not belong to you, on the other hand some may argue ‘finders keepers’ meaning you keep what you find. Thus, ethical concerns may also vary, what is ethically correct for one community might not be so for another. Ethics basically are the moral principles that govern a person’s behaviour towards the self and others while performing an activity.

Fieldwork in anthropology involves interactions with human beings where at times the researcher has to deal with sensitive data or information. A researcher might face dilemmas owing to ethical concerns in the field. 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. The format in which the data is collected, complied and reproduced may in itself lead to ethical concerns. 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 is 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 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 (Srivastava, 2020:155). Detailed information about ethics in research can be read in Unit 8.

Check Your Progress

12. “Anthropologists in the field can click photographs without consent”. State whether the following statement is either true or false.

13. What is the meaning of ethics?

4.6 SUMMARY

In this unit we have tried to acquaint the learners with the history of fieldwork in anthropology. How fieldwork emerged as a method for collecting first-hand information of the people under study. We have tried to trace the beginnings of anthropology to the collection of data from travelers, missionaries and administrators by armchair anthropologists to reconstruct the lives of the people from the faraway places. This gave way to the next generation of anthropologists who denounced the practice of the armchair anthropologists of collecting data from a secondary source. They ventured out to collect the information first hand and thus, started the tradition of going to the field. The doyens of fieldwork who worked towards establishing fieldwork as an integral part of anthropology have been explained in detail in this unit. Fieldwork as we understand today had to go
through a rigorous process, it was through the efforts, trails and errors of the many early anthropologists that today we have been able to establish it as the hallmark of anthropology. As Margaret Meads (1964:5) states, ‘we still have no way to make an anthropologist except by sending him into the field: this contact with living material is our distinguishing mark’. For a student of anthropology, fieldwork experience amounts to rite de passage of entering into the realm of anthropology.

4.7 REFERENCES


Young, V. P. (1996). *Scientific Social Surveys and Research*. Delhi: Prentice Hall of India


### 4.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. False
2. See section 4.1.
3. James Frazer
4. True
5. True
6. False
7. True
8. See section 4.3.
9. See section 4.4
10. False
11. False
12. False
13. See section 4.5