UNIT 1 UNDERSTANDING INDIAN SOCIETY*

Contents

1.0 Introduction
1.1 Evolutionary Approach
1.2 Historical Approach
1.3 Civilisational Approach
1.4 Summary
1.5 References
1.6 Answers to Check Your Progress

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this unit, you will learn about the:

- importance of understanding various approaches to studying Indian society and culture; and
- evolutionary, historical, and civilisational approaches to study Indian society.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Understanding Indian Society and its culture was and is a riddle for the students of anthropology and sociology. With more than eight religious beliefs, hundreds of languages, and caste groups that are situated in various geographical and climatic terrains, India truly presents a challenge for those who try to understand its society and culture. India is older than many western civilisations with its own scholars and scholarly knowledge. These knowledge sources were brushed out with the discriminatory western superiority towards orientalism and its scholarship. The ‘scientific’ study of Indian society through the anthropological discipline in the era of modern education started with the intensification of colonisation of India by the British. When the British started to take complete control over the governance of the Indian province, they faced hardships to understand the following:

- Land tenure and the system of collecting tenancy,
- Various castes and their role in the governing the vast India,
- Different religious groups and their communal harmony,”

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Structural Basis of Indian Society

- Rebellion and protests from unexpected quarters of an Indian province, i.e., from the tribal population,
- Various customs and traditions that are not understandable and are against the conscience of the ‘Victorian morals’ and white man’s burden.

British were left with no option than to employ Anthropologists to undertake a scientific study which could also aide the administrators to come up with solutions for their governance related problems. In addition to this need, India being a British colony, also acted as an advantage factor for the British anthropologists who came to the Indian sub-continent to test the theories that were prevalent at those times. The theories needed empirical evidences to either support or disprove them or to come up with alternative theoretical underpinnings of that time. Based on their interest and the area of research, various scholars approached their study from different theoretical underpinnings. Those who were interested to understand the origin of caste or to explain the diverse culture of the tribes and different communities approached their study from the ‘evolutionary perspective’. Those who want to understand the role of history in understanding the present approached from the ‘Historical perspective’. Those who were concerned with understanding the purpose of certain social institutions or customs approached their study from the ‘structural-functionalism perspective’. Those who wished to understand the communities and suggest measures to change the way they function approached it through a ‘Marxist perspective’. Those who wanted to study the society in its totality and to establish their connection with the other units of the system approached it with a ‘civilisational perspective.’ Those who wanted to understand the power structure of the gender relations approached their study through ‘gender perspective’. Those who wanted to understand the lower castes and their role in the society and to understand their plight approached their study through ‘subaltern perspective’. There are many other perspectives anthropologists employed based on the requirement of the study.

With approaches that can be replicated and tested and that can prove or disprove the findings of the earlier studies, the scientific study of Indian Society and its culture emerged as a robust academic discipline under the banner of Anthropology. In the following sections, we will discuss three main approaches– Evolutionary, Historical, and Civilisational approaches employed by scholars of anthropology to understand Indian society and its culture.

1.1 EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVE

With his work On the Origin of the Species (1859), Charles Darwin changed how the world was perceived. From the perspective of creationism, most of the people had started to develop another view of understanding the world from the evolutionary perspective. Though Charles Darwin’s work was related to natural science, its influence on the other sciences cannot be
denied. However, there were enough evidences to show the perspective of evolutionism was being simultaneously developed in the social sciences as well. Herbert Spencer had influenced Darwin with his concepts such as ‘survival of the fittest’ which Darwin seemed to resonate in his later works. The works such as *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) by Montesquieu; *Ancient Law* (1861) by Sir Henry Maine; *Mother Right* (1861) by JJ Bachofen; *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of Human Family* (1870) and *Ancient Society* (1877) by LH Morgan which were in the sphere of the social science stand testimony to how the perspective of evolutionism had shaped the intellectual spectrum of that time. Each of these above works have dealt with one or the other aspect of the culture or social institution proposing that they have reached this stage through an evolutionary process. Scholars across the world were eager to discuss the evolutionary theory and test its validity across the cultures. They were highly influenced by the then intellectuals discussing about the evolutionary theory and approached their own respective studies through the insight of the evolutionary approach.

British anthropologists who were also fascinated by the idea of studying ‘other’ and ‘simple’ communities and to find empirical evidences or solutions to the ‘complex’ problems that they were facing in their respective societies or cultures invariably approached their field studies through the evolutionary perspective. India and other colonies were considered as ‘infants of the society’ as evolutionary theories were reigning the academic discussions of that time and scholars were searching for ‘primitive’ or ‘simple’ societies to understand their social institutions in the assumption that they may provide an answer to understand their ‘complex’ social institutions of their societies. They saw the societies and cultures of the colonies or non-western societies as a ‘primitive’ and yet in the stages of the evolution with a hypothesis that these societies will also become complex over the period of time.

Those who studied the religion, culture, kinship organisation, economic organisations of the societies in the non-western societies such as Australia, Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the native American societies considered them simple. The evolutionary approach also worked on the premise of ‘psychic unity of mankind’ a belief that all humans and the societies think alike and hence it would be easy to understand the culture and society of the simple societies and that will help the social scientist to decipher and understand the complex societies better.

The nature of re-distributing the harvest from the highest to the lowest rungs of the society either in the form of tax or in the form of *jajmani* system had baffled the British administrators. Against their own understanding of the private property, the Indian way of land tenure and the control of the few of the caste groups was explained from the evolutionary perspective as primitive land systems that are owned by the community rather than individuals (CJ Fuller). The similarities between the religious practices from the Hindu
pantheon and the tribal religion also was interpreted as stages that need to be evolved, and branded the polytheism as primitive.

The evolutionary approach to study Indian society and culture also posed a threat to understanding them not in their own right but in relation to their own societies. The Western superiority and the authority that is driven from it to rule over the others was strengthened by the notion to consider and understand the non-western societies as simple and primitive.

**Check Your Progress**

1) What was the work that triggered the discussion on Evolution and subsequent adoption of studying the societies?

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1.2 HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

It is imperative that the scholars who are attempting to study a community are also aware of its history to arrive at a comprehensive picture. History of a society can be recorded through non-written and written sources. The societies that lack written evidence about their history are generally referred to as pre-historic societies, and the scholars mainly depend on archaeological and material evidences such as art, sculpture technique, architecture, coins and so on to narrate and speculate about the history of such societies. The societies that have written evidences are studied by scholars to understand their past. History plays a key role in explaining and understanding any society and its culture.

‘Historical Particularism’ was proposed by Franz Boas, an American Anthropologist as a critic to the evolutionists who seemed to speculate and force their findings to fit their societies into the evolutionary framework. He also points out that the evolutionary approach is invariably a comparative framework where the social scientist takes his/her own society as a yardstick and measures the community and its culture he/she is studying. He offers a solution through the concept of ‘Historical Particularism’ where he emphasises on the necessity of understanding or studying a society both in the present and its past context. The history of any community should be seriously taken into consideration in explaining the present situation.

Marxists also heavily depend on the history in explaining a society or culture. They approach their study with the ‘historical materialism’. In explaining the class inequalities and in understanding the propaganda of the rich and ruling
class that the poor are living in poverty because they are not working hard enough, the Marxist scholars use the concept of ‘historical materialism’ to understand what were the historical reasons that favored certain sections of the society amass wealth and how the wealth accumulated is systematically used to build the respective privilege positions and through the invention of private property and inheritance of the property how the privileged sections managed to pass on the wealth to their own offspring and denied the equal opportunities to the poorer sections of the society.

Understanding the historical texts and drawing interpretations based on these historical sources gave rise to the orientalist and Indological approaches in studying Indian society and culture. With the British taking up the administrative role more vigorously, they faced problems in understanding its diverse and variant social institutions and cultures. Some of the British officers thought by depending on the written records, and the scriptures that are native to India they could throw some light to bring uniformity to the diverse cultures and social institutions. They heavily depended on the travelers accounts to understand India from a historical perspective. Alexander Dow (an officer in the East India Company) published a first translation to the standard Persian histories of India –Tarikh-i-Firishtahi in the name of ‘The History of Hindustan’ in 1768-71. To understand caste, land tenure, and tribes and several other unique cultural factors of the Indian Society, many of the following European scholars depended on the scriptural texts that are available. The translations of the sacred scriptures had established that the Brahmans were the dominant group in the society and seen as the center of the social order. However, this view was contrary to the existing empirical evidences. Except for religiously derived power, the Brahman in the social order does not have political, economic, and numerical strength, which gave rise to the question that what are brahmans dominant of in the real-life scenarios. The acceptance of the Scripture as historical evidence gave the impression that Indian society is static and uniform in nature, whereas empirically, India provides a contrary view. This particular criticism against the use of the Scriptures as the historical evidence had led to the rise of importance on the empiricism and collecting of first hand data by the Anthropologists in India.

The later scholars who were interested in studying the Indian society and culture did not depend much on the scriptures but rather wanted to understand the complex historical process that Indian society experienced and hence concluded that the current society and culture is a product of long and complex processes. TK Oommen (1998) has identified seven major historical processes that had a profound impact on the current Indian society and culture.

(i) The Aryan ‘advent’, (ii) rise of Indian protestant religions– Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism against the Hindu religious practices and the subsequent revival of Hinduism, (iii) the coming of non-Indic religions as
immigrant religions and their impact on the native religions and the people, (iv) Muslim ‘conquests’, (v) Western Colonialism, (vi) Indian Independence movement, (vii) partition of the Indian sub-continent. These seven historical processes had their imprint on every aspect such as religion, caste, land tenure, architecture, the concept of nation and nationalism, economy, politics and demography of the Indian society and its culture.

Check Your Progress

2) Who proposed the Historical Particularism concept?

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1.3 CIVILISATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

When LH Morgan had categorised the then-existing societies from an evolutionary perspective as Savagery, Barbarism and Civilisation in his *Ancient Society* (1877), indicating the non-western societies are mostly in Savagery and Barbarism stage. In contrast, western societies are in civilisational stage. This calls for an obvious question what is civilisation? Pre-historians and Archaeologists based on their material findings categorise the sites as ‘civilisations’ or the ‘primitive’. However, applying the same logic to the existing societies and cultures drew a high amount of criticism for considering some cultures and societies as superior and some as inferior. The academic discussions of that period nudged the young anthropologists to get away with the usage of categorising the societies as primitive (simple) and civilisations (complex), rather it encouraged them to perceive them as cultures with equal value in their own right.

Following the training from this school of thought, many scholars tried to understand the cultures from the civilisational perspective. This perspective tries to locate each and every component of the society and culture in correlation with each other making it a giant web of network that provides us a larger picture rather than studying the individual components independently. Robert Redfield believed ‘Civilisation as a complex structure of the great and little traditions’. The civilisational perspective believes that every aspect of society and culture are interlinked and interdependent; one has to study them in their totality to understand the societies and cultures better.

BS Cohn while discussing the approaches to the study of Indian civilisation argues that ‘there is something distinctly Indian that can be experienced, cataloged, refined, described or measured underlying the distribution of a trait, a quality that is quintessentially Indian or partakes of Indian-ness emphasising that each and every aspect of the Indian society is connected and one should make an attempt to study them separately but without losing to see the interdependency between components involved.'
McKim Marriott, in his essay ‘Little Communities in an Indigenous Civilisation’ based on his fieldwork in the village called Kishan Garhi in Uttar Pradesh, tried to provide us a civilisational perspective. He elaborated by saying that the village Kishan Garhi reflected the Indian universe (i) through certain aspects of its social structure and (ii) through parts of its religious culture. Marriott, in furthering his arguments, analyses the village social structure i.e., the village as an isolable whole and yet at the same time how it is connected to the other villages and State through its economy, marriage, and kinship, social relationships and politics. In analysing the religious culture, Marriott also argued how the village has unique religious pantheons and customs (parochialisation) of its own, yet it also seeks connection and tries to universalise its religious practices. Trying to imitate the social structure of the state and king by the dominant caste by establishing the jajmani system the village provides enough evidence that it stands alone yet it is a component that is connected with the larger network to its outside society revealing the larger picture of how it is a civilisation that one needs to understand.

Milton Singer through his work ‘The Great Tradition in a Metropolitan Centre: Madras’ (1958) tries to argue how the culture of Madras that can be categorised as ‘great tradition’ still resembles or seeks connection with the ‘little tradition’ the continual flow of cultural connection between these two makes it a whole, making it a civilisation. He analyses the cultural performances of the little traditions such as Bhajans, and ritual customs was adopted in a manner the people could still participate but with certain modifications and variations to the versions of the little traditions. He also analyses how the cultural performances such as music and dance are elevated to the greater tradition yet firmly grounded with the roots of the little tradition.

LP Vidyarthi, with his work ‘Sacred Complex as a Dimension of the Indian Civilisation’ analyses the Gaya pilgrimage center acts as a defining factor for the Indian Civilisation. He analyses the Gaya and its (i) Sacred Geography (which has both the aspects of little and greater traditions) (ii) Sacred performances and (iii) Sacred specialists. Through his study, he establishes that how the pilgrims who come from every corner of the India bring something that is part of the little tradition and carry something back with them that is part of the greater tradition making Gaya a dimension of the Indian Civilisation (See also unit 16 for more to understand the contributions of LP Vidyarthi and NK Bose for studying the Indian society and culture through the civilisational perspective).

**Activity**

Try understanding your own village or caste or Tribe from the above discussed Evolutionary, Historical and Civilisational perspectives and try to analyse which perspective provides you the holistic picture. You also should be able to experiment by blending in two or more perspectives in understanding your Caste, Village or Tribe.
Check Your Progress

3) Name a few scholars who have contributed for the Civilisational Perspective to study Indian society and culture?

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1.4 SUMMARY

Various scholars with their respective academic training and influence from the then academic discussions have approached Indian society and culture from various perspectives. Based on their area of interest and research, they saw fit to employ the perspective that served the purpose of their study. Each perspective is like a lens that will aid the students to understand the society from its angle. It is advised to keep these perspectives in mind before attempting to understand the Indian society. If the students choose and deem fit they may club one or more perspectives to have an overall view of the Indian Society which is one of the characteristics of the anthropology discipline- helping its students to see a holistic picture.

1.5 REFERENCES


1.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1) On the Origin of the Species (1859) by Charles Darwin.

2) ‘Historical Particularism’ was proposed by Franz Boas an American Anthropologist as a critic to the evolutionist’s perspective to study the communities in comparison with their own.

3) McKim Marriott, Milton Singer, Bernard S Cohn, LP Vidyarthi, Robert Redfield, NK Bose.