

Fieldwork Tradition in Anthropology

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Preamble: The field of anthropology is today known best for its methodology based on fieldwork that began in the early nineteenth century. The very first anthropological fieldwork was undertaken to the Torres Straits in the Pacific by W.H.R.Rivers and A.C. Haddon between 1898-1899, but Bronislaw Malinowski, a British citizen of Polish origin who found himself exiled in the Trobriand Islands not by choice but by the historical accident, did the fieldwork that really marked out the anthropological tradition of what is known as participant observation. During the Second world war when Poland was annexed by Germany his dubious citizen status led him to be dumped in this remote island where he had no other company but the natives of the island and by the sheer need of some human company lived with them and made minute observations of what he termed as the 'imponderabilia of every day life'. His ethnography of the Trobriand islands (Malinowski 1961) has been regarded as a classic piece of anthropological observation and technique as well as of the functional theory of which he was an exponent. A couple of generations of anthropologists were nurtured on his work and of those who followed him and intensive fieldwork involving living in a community (the remoter the better), learning their language and following their every day existence and painstaking recording of facts became an essential part of being an anthropologist. But we must first understand the theoretical premises that led to fieldwork as a basic technique essential for all anthropological work for to begin with the founders of anthropology did not do any fieldwork and were known as "arm –chair anthropologists" by a later generations.

Ethnology vs. ethnography

Fieldwork was unheard of when Edward B Tylor occupied the first chair in social Anthropology at the university of Oxford. The theoretical approach practiced in those days is today known as ethnology that comprised the comparison of institutions of different societies from all over the world. The goal of such comparisons was to arrange the societies of the world in a ladder of progress to affirm the evolutionary theory advocated by scholars such as Tylor, Morgan, Bachofen, McLennan and Spencer (Stocking: 1974), to name a few of the most well known. There was no concept of human cultures and societies being different from each other. In a reaction to the racism of its times, the scientific community had united to put forward the hypothesis of 'psychic unity of mankind' that proclaimed that all human were not only the same species but that they thought in the same way. The differences in their life ways was because some of them were caught in a time warp from which they could be rescued by those who were in higher stages of culture or civilization. Although manifestly anti racial and professing a universal humanism this theory supported to a large extent colonial rule by justifying the occupation by 'superior European cultures' of the primitive society that could be spurred on to their course of evolution by civilization lessons from those who were at the apex of social evolution.

The initial phase of fieldwork was done by anthropologists in the pay role of the colonial governments and to help the administration to rule over people with alien cultures. The aim was to understand ' the native or the primitive as they were called. The academic interest in the so-called 'primitive' was to enable the white race to understand its past. The term primitive was coined, as it was believed that these people represented the past of the so- called superior cultures. The evolutionary theory thus debated on various issues such as what was the form of family that preceded the monogamous, patriarchal nuclear family of nineteenth century Europe or which was the most 'primitive ' of the religious forms. Books were written with titles such as 'Elementary forms of religious life', 'Ancient society', etc. that clearly manifested the idea that human societies were graded in terms of development and the study of contemporary societies called as 'our primitive contemporaries' would tell mankind about how they evolved from an earlier to the present stage of social development.

However scholars who went to study the so- called primitive societies soon discovered that they were not at all 'primitive' in a cultural sense. Paul Radin for example said that in all human societies we have people who are mystics, agnostics and atheists. It was also found that even if a society was at a stone- age state of technology it could be very advanced in terms of its religious belief or kinship systems.

The concept of progress and the evolutionary theory were deemed ethnocentric and eurocentric and discarded in view of a more liberal view of the world called cultural relativism. Along with it came the functional theory and the structural functional theory that looked upon each culture as a functioning whole. The next school of thought laid the

foundation for ethnographic fieldwork. Thus while ethnology is the comparative study of humankind, ethnography is the detailed study of a single society and culture.

Organic analogy and holistic approach

The structural functional school, led by Radcliffe-Brown opted for the organic analogy that visualized society as a structure of interrelated parts where each part contributed to the functioning of the whole. Central to the concept of social structure was the notion of social order or homeostasis. It was assumed that all societies were in equilibrium and static unless shaken up by some external agency. Such a point of view advised the colonial administration take up a policy on non-interference in local customs as any kind of interference would lead to a disruption of the status-quo and disrupt day to day normal existence. It was also a popular academic exercise to look for the function of each and every custom no matter how outlandish like female infanticide and head hunting. Malinowski too put forward his theory of functions in terms of the basic needs of individuals. His idea was that all institutions of society are geared to satisfy the various needs of the members of the society. Methodologically the structural functional and functional approach both advised that we should take a look at a society as a holistic and unique phenomenon. Since each society was a perfectly functioning system there was no way one could compare it to another. Thus the comparative method was more or less discarded in view of detailed study of a single or at best a couple of. Societies. Even when comparisons were drawn as say in Scarlett Epsteins' study of two villages in South India or Leach's study of the societies in High land Burma(1954), these were specific to a region and culture. The ethnographic method, namely the in depth study of a single culture, thus developed has remained a hallmark of anthropological studies ever since and even when the theoretical perspectives of the structural functional and the functional school were largely discarded in favour of Marxist, Cultural historical, Cognitive and Psycho-cultural approaches the merits of doing fieldwork were always appreciated. Even post-modernism and the colonial and feminist critiques have redefined fieldwork, and rediscovered it in many ways but a visit to the field and collection of intensive empirical data has never been replaced in anthropology. In the next few sections we shall discuss how the nature of fieldwork has varied over the past nearly one hundred years of anthropology.

The positivist approach to fieldwork

Both the evolutionary approach and the functional approach were rooted in the belief that a science of society was possible complete with the formulation of generalized laws of society. It was this that led to formulation of the theories such as the ethnical periods of Morgan and the laws of kinship by Radcliffe-Brown. Diligent fieldwork marked by scientific objectivity could enable a fieldworker to unravel the basic truths about society just as intensive study of a watch would enable a person to find out what made it tick. Just as a mechanic would be able to tell how to repair a watch or to make a better one, an anthropologist after their detailed understanding of a society obtained after a long and substantive fieldwork would not only be able to tell how the society functioned but also give advise as to its repair and its 'betterment' or 'development'.

The objective approach advocated for an anthropologist included not getting emotionally involved in the society they were studying, to remain ethically neutral so as not to form a value judgement about anything that they observed. As Victor Turner (1967) has written in his study of rituals, the observations of the participant in any ritual is situated in the position that he /she occupies in the ritual. They are likely to base their interpretation on the view from the position they occupy. Thus a person on a dance floor would look at the rest of the scene from the corner occupied by him. But a neutral observer is one who looks at the dance floor from a distance and to whom the entire dance floor is visible from an equidistance perspective like looking at it from the top. The view of the fieldworker had to be objective and unbiased that is obtained from a neutral stand outside the field. This distance was not a physical one for he/she was situated within the field physically but a mental one. This rule of scientific objectivity was based on the premise that the field situation for an anthropologist is similar to the laboratory of a scientist and observations to be done in the field have to be done with the same degree of detachment. It was this distancing oneself from the situations one observed that was an aspect of anthropological training. The explanations that came forth from the field were to be analyzed according to the logic of the observer. What the actors said about what they were doing was only a part of data but not a part of the explanation.

Participant and quasi- participant observation

To get authentic data and to be as close to the action as possible fieldworkers are taught to do what is known as participant observation and if that is not possible then one at least has to do quasi- participant observation. The meaning of anthropological observation is clearly defined in order to set it apart from what is known as simply 'seeing'. Every one sees but not every one observes. Thus observation is defined as purposeful seeing. When an anthropologist looks at things it is with an aim in view, the aim to understand and find an explanation for what ever is happening. Obviously by mere seeing even if with a purpose one cannot understand many things. Thus observation in this sense is quite different from the observation one carries out in the laboratory where the observed phenomenon are silent. The field of the anthropologist consists of other human beings who both speak and think.

Unlike inanimate objects the performance of humans is clothed in culturally constructed meanings and simply by looking the meaning of any object, performance or relationships is impossible to ascertain. Thus what is participant observation is basically a process by which the anthropologist tries to live in the community to be studied, learns the language and asks questions from the inmates of the culture called in anthropological parlance as he informants to understand and make sense out of what is seen. When a field worker is able to assume a role within the culture and be accepted as a part of the society then it is called as participant observation. However when a certain situation cannot permit the anthropologist to assume a role or to participate in what is being done because of ethical and personal reasons then a ring side seat has to do and this is called as quasi participant observation. For example if a person goes to a tribe and is accepted as a member of one of the clans, hunts and gathers with the tribe, takes part in their rituals and eats and sleeps

with them, then his/her participation is nearly complete. However complete participation may be impossible for that may mean that one has abandoned the role of anthropologist perhaps forever. For example Turnbull (1962) who did field work among a hunting food gathering tribe, several years with them, went on hunting expeditions with the men and lived as close to their way of life as possible could not marry a Mbuti woman and settle down for ever as a tribesman, even though his fellow brothers of the tribe expected him to. Thus when full participation occurs as in the case of Carlos Castenada (1968), who having become a full disciple of Don Juan left his own world to become a full time shaman, the person's identity changes and he no longer remains an anthropologist. In other words one when playing the role of a member of a culture is still retaining one's inner identity as a researcher and scholar. When one returns from the field this identity is abandoned although an individual fieldworker may experience profound changes in one's person and way of thinking.

Most scholars may be content to do what is commonly known as quasi- participant observation when one enters the field as a researcher and maintains that identity. A scholar may stay on and off in the field but there is no attempt to change one's identity. As the nature of an anthropologist's field is changing and the classical fieldwork where one went to work with a pristine community untouched by contact with outsiders like the initial work done by anthropologists in the colonial period is no longer feasible, the nature of fieldwork is becoming more transparent. There is little attempt to change one's identity although to be adopted into a family is still quite possible. One may refer to Erin Moore's description of her work in a Mina village where she is adopted by a local family and lives like their daughter, is given a rupee to go to the fair by her adopted father, sweeps the floor and makes dung cakes like her adoptive sister and is a part of the good and bad times the family goes through, yet when her adoptive father lies dying she is unable to help in ways in which she could but is restrained by her own role. Later she keeps in touch informing the family about her marriage and her children (Moore 1998). Many a times anthropologists come back to their villages often to strong feelings of nostalgia as written about by Haimendorf in his book 'Return to the Naked Nagas'.

A phenomenon that one comes across often is that of person studying their own communities after getting training as anthropologists. In the initial period of fieldwork as a technique the identity of the anthropologist was mainly white and male although there were a few white women also like Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict. Increasingly those communities that were being studied by the western people are being studied by the so-called natives. Ethnographies written by people about their own communities are many. Even when one may not work on exactly the community of one's birth to study one's own region is very common like South Asians studying in South Asia, Africans in Africa and so on.

One major goal of fieldwork is to understand the systems of meaning on which a culture operates. Human beings unlike other species live in a culturally constructed world of meanings. Nothing makes sense in a human world apart from the meaning that is ascribed to it by culture. Humans are least guided by their genetic characters, all interpreted by culture to mean some thing or the other in different societies. Thus even things as basic as

what is edible, what is animate and what is inanimate, what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman, how does one understand ageing, all these are culture specific.

When a person is studying one's own culture the meaning of many things is already known and clear but such a situation has its own advantages and disadvantages.

Culture Shock and Rapport Establishment

One phenomenon that a person entering an alien culture is expected to encounter is culture shock. This is because meanings can change dramatically across cultures. People who are accustomed to see brides wearing white may be startled to find that in another culture widows wear white. No matter how much one may be familiar with a culture from the outside one cannot apprehend every aspect of culture from the outside and one goes to live in another culture there is bound to be some degree of culture shock. Every anthropologist can recount some instances of culture shock during the course of their fieldwork. Anthropological training involves not denying that culture shock exists but how best to deal with it. One is always uncomfortable trying to cope with alien ways of life, eating food that one is not accustomed to and to adapt one's self to unfamiliar ways of life. For a person outside to the culture things can often get uncomfortable both physically and mentally; fieldworkers often experience periods of depression and ill health. When a fieldworker is working in one's own community the aspect of culture shock may be minimized.

But there are other problems that one may face if working in a familiar setting. One of the central problems is that observations in an unfamiliar setting are always more acute. When one sees things that are unfamiliar the curiosity is raised and one notes even very small details. But when working in one's own culture many of the things that one sees are taken for granted and may be so familiar that one may not even notice them. This is the reason that outsiders often write excellent ethnographies while those who belong to the culture sometimes do not even see the point of noticing something that is for them absolutely 'commonplace'. In fact one can say that one's fieldwork is over when every thing appears commonplace and one is left with no further questions to be asked.

Moreover when one is working in one's own community one may face other kind of problems. A woman who went to work on demography in her own community often faced irritated response from her informants as to why she appeared so ignorant about her own community. It was a negative reflection on her that she was asking so many questions regarding her own community and appeared ignorant about things that she should have known.

The positivist approach that characterized the classical fieldwork traditions in anthropology thus discouraged people to work in communities too close to themselves. We have little or no example from the early years of anthropology of ethnographies that were done by scholars among their own people. One reason to begin with was obviously that social anthropology unlike sociology developed as a discipline that studied the

‘other’ and it was mostly white men who went to work among the ‘natives’; we have in fact famous textbooks with names like “ Other Cultures”, “ Primitive government”, ‘Sex and Repression in savage societies’ and so on. Secondly it was considered against the rule of objectivity, the concept of ‘marginal natives’ that was invoked in classical fieldwork traditions.

Because one was always required to enter the field as a stranger and an outsider, the concept of rapport establishment is of great importance in anthropological research. It basically means that one has to familiarize the field with one’s self. One must build up enough confidence in the people to be studied that they may often divulge their innermost secrets to the anthropologist. Considering the wealth of data that has been collected by scholars in the field one is amazed at the level of confidence generation that was achieved. Anthropologists have penetrated the innermost secret of tribes, gone inside secret societies participated in forbidden rituals, pried open the most private sexual experiences and so on. To some extent the data could have been got because of the power differential that was perceived by the dominated population of the white race. For example in his ethnography Haimendorf (1976) mentions that he was referred to as ‘Ang’(chief) by the Nagas. To some extent the data could have been generated by the anthropologists genuine efforts to merge himself or herself with the field and thirdly an issue to which we shall return later is the authenticity and status of the data itself.

No matter how one views it rapport establishment remains one of the major achievements of anthropology, one that is even today recognized as the unique contribution of the discipline. Rapport establishment does not mean only that one is able to familiarize oneself with the field or to be able to get people to talk to them. It means most of all the ability to empathize, to be able to look at the world from the perspective of the people one has come to study. It is this ability that makes the contribution of the anthropologist most unique among all the social scientists. Even during the most positivist era ethnographers were able to get into the culture and tell us how the Nuer (Evanspritchard: 1940) for example looked at their world and how people classified and categorized phenomenon; what the wind in rain and the sun meant to the people; how they dealt with the problems of their existence and all this was done ideally in a value free language. An anthropologist is always trained not to impose their own values on the people they study. At least at the conscious level this is what most of them tried to achieve.

Tools of fieldwork

Rapport establishment marks only the beginning of fieldwork. Since the ultimate goal of fieldwork is academic research there is a need to collect different types of data in keeping with the aims of one’s research. Although in anthropology one assumes the holistic perspective and the main aim of staying in the field is to familiarize one’s self with the overall meaning system of the culture, there are always certain areas about which one needs to know more or get specialized knowledge. One kind of data that one may always need is of the quantitative kind. Such data sometimes forms the base on which further qualitative research is carried out or it may be used to support some deductively obtained

generalization. Some of the basic tools used by anthropologists to gather more systematic and sometimes specialized and quantifiable data are as follows

a. *Genealogical method*:- Kinship has traditionally been one of the areas on which most ethnographies need to have knowledge. This particular method was devised by W.H.R. Rivers to collect data on kinship but that can also be used to collect a variety of other data, especially those that involve the transformations over generations, as also various kinship related aspects like marriage distance, patterns of marriage, divorce rate, demographic data like numbers of children, death rate, birth rate and so on.

It essentially involves the diagrammatic representation of one informant's family ties extending over several generations depending upon the memory of the informant. It does not mean lineal representation alone but the tracing of ties bilaterally, the idea being to include as many persons as possible over as many generations as possible. It has the advantage that data concerning many persons are condensed into one genealogy. One may choose to mark some particular variables into the genealogy like age at marriage, or occupation, or education so that we can tell if there has been a change in age at marriage over the generations or what is the educational transformation over three or four generations. Being a pictorial diagram it makes analysis easy as everything is in front.

The choice of informant is very important, as older informants with good memory are better than younger informants who may not have good knowledge about the family tree. Some societies have a tradition of maintaining genealogies and in India there is a caste group that maintains genealogies. Such people may have a wealth of data with them.

b. *Interview Guides*: Often when one is entering into a conversation it is with a specific goal in mind, like one may be interested in knowing about herbal medicines or about marriage prestations or about development activities and one has an idea about what kind of information is required. In the course of an open conversation there is tendency for the conversation to drift. So an interview guide is an open ended set of questions that act as reference point for the interviewer to bring the conversation back to certain crucial areas on which information is being sought. It is also like a reminder that one needs to ask something on a particular aspect. However it is advised that one should never impose one's self on the informant. It is best to let the conversation take its own course. Moreover everything is data so that one can get valuable information even when one is not directly asking for it.

The interview situation is not one sided and it should not be treated as the privilege of the anthropologist to ask questions and get answers.

One must remember that it is the informant who is doing us a favour by answering our questions. It is we who are imposing ourselves on another person's time. The interview situation is also an interactive one. The person we are talking to is as curious about us as we are about them. Often anthropologists find themselves at the receiving end of a volley of questions. One must answer all questions as honestly as possible and must remember that the scholar and the informant are interacting as equals; we have no more rights than

the people we are talking to. Also the informants are subject to culture shock just like the fieldworker. I remember that once on a fieldtrip to Rajasthan an old woman almost died of shock when told that a bevy of fully- grown up girl students were all unmarried. Like wise the scholar may have to face many situations of disbelief and ridicule as well. Erin Moore records that when she told her elderly adoptive mother, “chachi” that the moon she saw overhead was the same moon as in America, the response was, “liar”.

Thus to take an interview may not be a smooth and one time process either. It is not and it should not also be formalized. It is best to be in a situation where the person one is talking to feels quite comfortable. Women anthropologists often find gossip groups at places where women congregate together as the best places to carry on conversations like in a work group where women are knitting or making mats. In an Indian village the village well or stream is an ideal place for an afternoon of conversation and gossip.

Since every one has work to do it is best not to take up someone’s time when that person is busy unless one is able to lend a helping hand. Washing clothes and utensils, helping in household work or child- care may be a good way to both build up rapport and to get information. Moreover it is always good to remind the informant that there is a bond of humanity binding the two, the sharing of commonality of experience may bring out more information than other wise. When I was doing fieldwork among the dhobis as a young married woman I often had young married dhobi women sharing their problems with their in-laws and husbands with me. At a later stage in other field situations I could side with the older women and share in the gossip of the grandmothers.

Men often find the village or neighbourhood tea stall an ideal place for both observation and conversation. The barber’s shop in an Indian situation is also an ideal place to pick up information; visits to the market place, weekly *haats*, religious congregations, temples and schools are essential part of collecting data and carrying on informal interviews.

Structured Interview schedules

Quite often one needs quantified data on some aspects as well as qualitative data. Since the people anthropologists work with are quite often illiterate or semi literate, the tool that one uses is called an interview schedule. It is a more structured version of the interview schedule where a series of questions are put in a sequence. Some of these questions can also be closed ended questions with definite alternatives as answers, for example, “ Did you go to school?” Yes/No

“ If not, the reason was” a. Not allowed by parents
b. No money
c. No school near by
d. Did not want to study.

Once answers to such questions are received they can be quantified.

Other kind of structured data that are collected during fieldwork are regarding household budgets, or household census. While collecting such data it must be remembered that one

should not appear to be officious. Often when trying to collect data on household budget or number of children, people in villages may get hostile thinking that government officials have come and an anthropology student may have a hard time trying to convince people that they are not on official duty. It is often advised to collect such data after one's credentials in the field have been established and one shares a fair degree of rapport.

The sequence in which one embarks on the collection of data may play a crucial role in rejection or acceptance in the field area. It is always advisable not to begin by asking questions of sensitive issues like number of children, household income etc.

Indigenous categories

A very important dimension of collection of field data is not to impose one's own cultural or even anthropological categories on the people one is studying. A common difficulty while doing fieldwork in rural India is to ask people their age; now chronological age is something that is not on the cultural agenda of many people to whom age may make sense only in terms of what Meyer Fortes (1958) has called "structural time". It makes sense to ask what is the social status of a person, whether a person is married, or is a parent or a grand parent, etc. It would make no sense to many people to know that a person is thirty years old or fifty years old; they would understand only the stage reached in the life cycle of a person. I was sometimes told by my informants while pointing to a person quite old that that person was ninety years old. However when I made my rough calculations I would find the person was not more than perhaps seventy years old. To the community the term ninety years old was like a metaphor of very advanced age, that was ascertained not by the actual number of years a person had lived but by the number of generations that one had acquired behind one's self. That is if a woman had great- great grand children she would metaphorically have become very ancient.

Thus if a researcher is interested in knowing chronological she must calculate it herself other wise relying on what informants tell you may be risky. But on the other hand what informants tell you is itself valuable cultural data. What they do not tell you is also very important data. While conducting fieldwork in certain places like Rajasthan, a group of students were taken by surprise to find that whenever they would ask about the number of children in a household, they were told about the number of sons or male children only. Whenever they tried to ask about the girl children, the informants would keep silence or would turn hostile if pressed too much. The reasons are cultural. Firstly a girl-child is not considered a part of family so she is not counted culturally among the number of children a family has. This was true also in Punjab. Whenever talking about children, '*baccha*', women normally meant only male children, girls child is not counted among one's progeny. In Rajasthan there is the additional element of '*purdah*', too much curiosity about girl-children may be considered as an assault on the honour of the family. Thus while the silences serve as valuable data, yet for demographical enquiry the lack of data on female children can be devastating. Again there can be two ways out of such a dilemma. Either one tried to observe what is not being told or over a period of time try to build up confidence such that the data comes out slowly.

A major difficulty faced in fieldwork is with the age, sex characters of the fieldworkers. To get acceptance in the field one has to be accepted ones self, but since the culture to be studied has its own cultural norms that pertain to how each person occupying a particular status has to conduct herself/himself, it is not possible for each and every person to get to each and every type of data. When I had taken a group of students to fieldwork it was found that often an older woman would ask the young girls to go away or sit outside, while they shared a juicy piece of gossip with me. Young and unmarried girls can often be told “ this does not concern you”. A young man can, in a conservative society find it quite difficult to talk to young women or in a society practicing rigid sex segregation, to talk to women at all. Thus indigenous categories of appropriate and in appropriate behaviour for persons of various age and sex categories might hamper fieldwork in some ways. At the same time the ‘outsider’ label can be helpful in such situations. When I was doing fieldwork as a young among the dhobi community, my rather scandalous behaviour in roaming around alone without a male escort, quite late in the evenings did raise eyebrows but was not such a difficulty as it was accepted, I belonged to a different kind of social category of educated people, “ *pade likhe log*” who are more broad minded towards women. One day when I had stayed back to observe a wedding, I was asked quite point blank if my husband did not object to so doing. When I said no, the word got around that persons in the educated class were definitely more liberal. It was perhaps because of this that I could talk directly to the men as well.

In an Indian context, caste and religion can also become an issue especially while working in areas where such identities make a difference. In the faction- ridden villages, too much association with one faction, even unknowingly may shut many doors on the face of the fieldworker. Similarly accepting water and food in the house of a low caste may ban the entry of a fieldworker in the upper caste households. In such cases often the fieldworker would have to make a choice, especially if one is working in one’s own community. For example a foreigner fieldworker may be excused caste differentiation but it would be difficult for an Indian to profess that she would like to take food with people of all caste groups. In such cases one may have to make a conscious choice of from where to collect data and that would of course depend upon the perspective of the scholar.

The indigenous terms of use and concepts are also to be recorded as far as possible. Quite often students face difficulty in the field trying to fit the data into ready- made categories they have learnt in their text- books. Again there would perhaps be no native institution that can be described as a clan or a village council but there may be indigenous versions of these. Now-a –days it is considered much wiser to use the categories being used in the field and to use the indigenous terms, than to fit every thing into a text book language.

In a good part of fieldwork should consist in trying to find out the native cognitive categories for each culture has its own way of looking at he world and of classifying things. However this trend is part of a larger shift away from the classical premises of anthropological research, namely the reduction of everything to nomothetic categories of generalized truths. From the middle of the twentieth century much that was idealized during the first few decades of that century namely the emphasis on positivism and the faith in the western scientific method was falling apart. The reasons were rooted in the

historical circumstances of de-colonization that led away from the supremacy of the west, the coming into the intellectual stream of hitherto marginalized categories namely women and the 'others' the so-called natives, tribes, colonized populations who were getting a voice of their own that reflected and echoed many voices from the western world itself that critiqued the hitherto unquestioned bastions of truth constructed by the west. This was the age of deconstruction, of post-modernism and post-structuralism.

The debate of subjectivity vs objectivity in social research

The debate from within anthropology began when anthropologist did restudies of field areas that broke the monopoly of statements that had been considered as God's truth before. Since only one anthropologist could visit one area, it was an unwritten rule that their opinion on any one area that 'belonged' to them was considered sacrosanct. Thus no one at that time would have questioned the authenticity of what Malinowski said about the Trobrianders or Evans-Pritchard wrote about the Nuer. However when Derek Freeman (1983) critiqued the authenticity of Margaret Mead's data about the Manus, it raised a long drawn out controversy. Freeman had not questioned Mead's own integrity as an anthropologist but that she was not able to get the 'real' data because of her age and sex. As a young woman, the informants did not take her seriously. Without going into the debate that raised doubts about Freeman's own subjectivity and biases, the next and far more theoretically relevant controversy was raised by Annette Weiner's restudy of the Trobrianders (Weiner 1976). Speaking from a gendered point of view Weiner was able to show that Malinowski did not report about women's important contribution to the economy, their role in the trade and political system of the islands not because he did not know about it, but that he simply did not consider anything concerning women worth writing about. This and the publication of Malinowski's diary (1967) put an end to the 'objectivity' of anthropological fieldwork.

The fact that the scholars were reporting their own version of what they believed the societies should be rather than what the societies really were became apparent in many follow up researches and the feminist critique as well as the colonial critique became an important part of this. It is also not that these two were always speaking from different platforms, for both were trying to say that so far only certain privileged voices in the form of 'white and male' were allowed to speak. Etienne and Leacock (1980:1) have pointed out how Evans-Pritchard, in his 1955 Fawcett lecture to the women students of Bedford had described the so called "primitive' woman as confined to the household, being under the rule of her father and then her husband and passive. This in spite of the fact that he has mentioned and it was even then corroborated by much of the research carried out by anthropologists that women in tribal societies had far greater decision-making powers than the Victorian women. Yet Evans-Pritchard continued to generalize the subjugation of women as a universal character of all societies. In fact many anthropological text- books, including that on Kinship and Marriage by Robin Fox (1967), take the fact of patriarchy as a given condition of all societies. Moreover the subjugation of women was also taken as a hall- mark of savagery by the colonial rulers and was a part of the mind set of most white men that included the anthropologist. Thus

even a scholar like Evans-Pritchard was weighed down by his preconceived notions about women among the 'savages' in spite of actual data to the contrary.

Women anthropologists have done path-breaking work in showing that women in tribal societies did have more power and prestige and quite often it was colonization that was directly responsible for the marginalisation of women.

Some concepts and assumptions were came in for particular criticism, the foremost among them was the assumption of stable ahistoricity of the so called tribal societies. The entire structural –functional school was demolished when it was shown that most of the societies considered as static were in fact products of historical processes like any other (Wolf: 1982) and had assumed their present form often as a violent encounter with colonial rule.

This led to another transformation of the fieldwork process that is collecting and relying on data that was not static or confined to one time period.

The historical method

The structural –functional school had confined itself to the study of the present because it thought that one could do justice only the data that one could observe. However once it became clear that all that exists in the present is constituted out of past events and that by ignoring the past we can never do justice to the present, the study of ethno-history and other ways of collecting data about the past became an integral part of fieldwork. The entire construction of history as a scientific construction of the past has been critiqued by contemporary historiographers who are less inclined to treat history as something that is 'inscribed in stone' than as some kind of construction of the past by which the present is reaffirmed. In that sense then ethno-history or a people's own sense of history becomes sometimes an important witness for construction of identity or a political statement. Thus the structural –functional criticism of history as impossible to construct for non-literate people has become redundant in the face of the realization of ethno-history and also the contestation of history by different groups. This brings us to the concept of modern ethnography where many of the assumptions of classical fieldwork have been rejected.

Ethnography and fieldwork in the post-modern world

One of the most important assumptions of classical fieldwork that it is possible to construct a unified picture of a society and culture, that so called 'primitive' cultures are homogenous as well as static. For one the world has changed a lot in the post-colonial period and communication, migration, travel and market forces have created complex societies by the forces of globalization, industrialization and mass communication. However even for the past, doubt has been created as to whether the pristine, homogenous and static society was ever a reality or a construction of the imagination of the scholar. It is believed that the construction of stable equilibrium as a normal condition of society was a construct to help the colonial administration. Eric Wolf (1982) has shown that the monopoly of the west over history is a "moral success story". In reality

there is unlikely to find any society without history, as there is an ancient tradition of long distance trade and travel that goes back to the most ancient civilizations as well to the remotest corners of the world.

Today a static approach is almost unthinkable rather there is a great involvement with what may be called as a people's "sense of history". Moreover fieldwork itself is transforming its character and we have transnational societies, diasporas and the notion of a "global village" that makes the isolated study of any field area both unrealistic as well as unfruitful. Even during the fifties and sixties anthropologists were already thinking in terms of concepts such as 'networks' to study more complex societies when it was realized that the local cannot be understood without reference to what is happening outside. Today the concept of multi-sited ethnography is becoming a necessity to study complex social phenomenon. The notion of a bounded system is now realized to be unrealistic and therefore the kind of systemic relationships visualized by the structural – functional school is become obsolete.

Most or rather all fieldworks today are done with a sense of an open society, an unbounded social and complex social reality whose boundaries may be quite indefinable. The merging of the local with the global is a recognized phenomenon. Today I cannot do fieldwork even in the remotest tribal village without taking into account not only the physical and environmental processes of global warming and deforestation but also the fact that the local community is part of a global system of meanings that tend to flow in from many channels. Today the fieldworker is faced not just with a situation where he has to explain local customs in their own context, the hallmark of classical ethnography but to explain how an ecological disaster in one part of the world has its roots somewhere else and its effects are felt in another place. One has to decipher how decisions taken in the White House affect the lives of peasants in Malaysia or the use of a particular technology in one part of the globe may affect the health of people in a remote mountain village.

Another assumption, that of internal homogeneity of a society; following the feminist critique it is today well recognized that competing and contesting voices may arise from within a society. It is well recognized also that even the smallest societies may have number of cleavages internal to it. More over new factions and interest groups continue to arise in the face of new situations. Thus fieldworkers are often faced with alternate explanations and a multiplicity of voices from within the same field area. These voices belong to different classes, self-interests and also reflect the multiple levels of identity that people may assume under different conditions. Thus a person may be speaking as a woman in one context, as a political leader in another context and as a person with economic self-interest in another context.

The question for the fieldworker is what to record? It is believed that even the earlier fieldworkers must have faced similar situations but at that time it was believed that truth has to be presented as an objective fact and that cannot be contested. Therefore the scholar used his/her analytic wisdom to report selectively often presenting a beautiful harmonious picture that tied up all the loose ends in a perfect fit. In the process they may

have ignored many things that they observed. Yet today it is believed that if one really wants to present the truth as far as possible, then the ethnography is going to be both disjointed and jerky. There are bound to be inconsistencies and loose ends. The reality is not only complex but also very dynamic. What is the truth in one situation may not be so in another situation although the same phenomenon may be under observation. Thus while studying the social space occupied by men and women in a village in Haryana (Channa 1998) I had found that what was presented at the surface contained an undercurrent of dissent and covert practices that were not even known to many members of the same society. Thus looking at the society from the point of view of women I found that the overt patriarchy of rural Haryana society had a covert structure of practices of women undermining silently through both symbolic and substantive gestures the dominance of the men.

The subjective position of the fieldworker

The argument of objectivity based on his/her position outside the field was acceptable to the classical fieldworkers but deconstructionist philosophy of the twentieth century and the colonial critique in particular denied that any kind of objectivity is possible as far as there exists a relationship of differential power between the fieldworker and the field as well as the fact that the fieldworker too is a constituted subject (in his or her own culture). That it is impossible to completely overcome the limitations of one's own subjectivity is a topic that has been extensively discussed in the post-modern era and to day the reflexivity of the anthropologist is an accepted part of all fieldwork descriptions and even the contemporary students are encouraged to record their fieldwork experiences in a reflexive manner putting themselves within the field.

The only solution to overcoming the limitations of the subjective position of the fieldworker is to make it conscious and overt so that the reader is able to evaluate the effects of the ethnographer's subjectivity by having knowledge of it. Thus approaching the field from the point of view of a woman would mean that the reader would expect a gendered bias and would perhaps welcome it. In the post modern era of anthropology, to have a bias is acceptable, to hide it behind the veil of objectivity is not acceptable. Thus the ethnographer's presence in the pages of the writing of culture is becoming more and more explicit.

To report or write about another culture is not quite the same as a literal translation (if such a thing is possible). A culture is always understood by interpretation and there is no way one can directly communicate what one sees. As an example try to write down a ritual only in terms of what one sees and see how incomprehensible it reads. Whenever we write we are consciously or unconsciously translating not just words but the events and actions into a framework of the culture in whose language we write. In the present day there is a double layer of translation as many of the anthropologists are translating first from one culture into their own cognitive understanding and then again translating this into a foreign or second language. The result is not always very lucid and thus anthropologists who are forced to write in English when their mother tongue is Tamil and the field area they have studied speaks Hindi, may not achieve the level of

comprehension that an English speaking person may achieve. But quite a few do overcome such limitations to exhibit excellent writing skills in more than one language.

But whether in English or in French, rarely is ethnography written in the native tongue. In fact in that case it would probably defeat its purpose of presenting a culture to the outside world. The ground reality of anthropology thus still lies in the power differential between the colonizers and the colonized, for even though today the erstwhile colonized are free and the anthropologist may belong to that category, yet to write about culture one has still to use a language that belongs to the power holders of the world.

However it is in this context that we come to another and a most important ethical question raised by fieldwork, namely the responsibility of the anthropologist towards the people he/she studies.

In the contemporary world apart from translating the cultures of little known communities and populations before the world the anthropologists have often discharged the duty of representing these people and to act on their behalf. The ethics of fieldwork lies in that anthropology is not only a science about humans it is in itself a humanistic science. It may be circumstance of their work that brings the fieldworker close to human suffering and pain and makes them realize what it means to be occupying a marginal position. Mencher (1975) in her field experience has written that sometimes when she was not allowed to enter a household because of her foreign and therefore non-Hindu status and she stood in the rain trying to balance an umbrella and a note book at the same time, she realized to some extent what it meant to be an untouchable, to be denied entry into houses and even a glass of water in the heat.

Even when anthropologists are witnesses to the pain and suffering, the fact that they are required by the very nature of their discipline to develop an empathetic bond with their informants, they cannot ignore the feelings and emotions of their subjects. It is this intersubjectivity that is now recognized as the strength of the discipline rather than its objectivity. Even during the colonial era the anthropologists employed by the government did not always corroborate what the administration wanted them to do. Many of them came out openly against the accepted premises of colonialism that the savages needed to be civilized. It was anthropologists who were the first to critique race and ethnocentrism and they could do it because their fieldwork experience revealed to them that they were no different from the people they studied. No doubt the publishing of Malinowski's diaries may raise some doubts as to how far an anthropologist is really emotionally involved in his field, yet there have been many genuine converts and many of the causes of the marginalized people have been taken up and highlighted by fieldworkers.

In the twentieth century many the point of view of the anthropologists has converted the world into thinking in terms of the successful adaptation of the pre-industrial people that had preserved the environment for millions of years. The environmental disasters being faced by the world today as well as the moral and social problems increasing rather than decreasing in the age of rapid globalization has made the world realize that her was

wisdom in the ways of lives studied by anthropologists and the methodology of fieldwork has much to recommend it as it is only in this way that in depth knowledge about people can be obtained.

Non-anthropologists such as doctors and even engineers also use fieldwork techniques when they need to interact with people. The role of anthropologist in implementing policies and projects where people are involved has been recognized to the extent that no-a –days there can be no project that does not require having an anthropologist as advisor on its panel. The empathetic understanding gained through fieldwork is the only manner in which a humanistic approach can be ensured.

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