
UNIT 1 NATURE AND SCOPE OF ETHNOGRAPHY

Contents

- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 History and Development of Ethnography
 - 1.2.1 Beginnings of Ethnography a specialised skill for social science research
 - 1.2.2 Essentials of Ethnography
 - 1.2.3 Methodological Concerns
- 1.3 New Trends in Ethnography
- 1.4 Summary
 - References
 - Sample Questions

Learning Objectives

This unit will help the students to understand the:

- relevance of ethnography in anthropological studies;
- history and development of ethnography; and
- emerging trends in ethnographical studies.

1.1 INTRODCUTION

In simplest terms, ethnography is the systematic description of a contemporary culture through fieldwork. In loose and broad sense, the goal of ethnography is to provide a detailed, indepth description of everyday life and practice of a people. Many scholars referred to it as “thick description”, a term attributed to Clifford Greetz (1973) who was developing the idea of an interpretive theory of culture in the 1970s. From another angle, the term ethnography has come to be equated with virtually any qualitative research project. Thus, traditionally speaking, ethnography may be described as the best tool of qualitative research in anthropology whose aim is cultural interpretation. Thus an ethnographer is supposed to go beyond reporting events and details of experience but to attempt to explain how these represent “webs of meaning”, a phrase borrowed from Geertz (1973).

As rightly suggested by Barnard and Spencer (1996), the word ‘ethnography’ has a double meaning: ethnography as *product* (ethnographic writings) and ethnography as *process* (participant observation or fieldwork). The product depends upon the process but not in any simple relationship. In constructing ethnographies, anthropologists do more than merely ‘writing up’ the field notes they record as part of the process of doing fieldwork. If ethnographies can be seen as the building blocks and testing grounds of anthropological theory, ethnographies and the ethnographic process from which they derive are also shaped and moulded by theory. As a category of anthropological research, ethnography is characterized by a first hand study of a small community or ethnic group. “Such studies combine, to a varying degree, descriptive and analytical elements, but the central characteristic of conventional ethnographies is that they focus on one specific culture or society and consider theoretical or comparative generalisation from the stand point of the ethnographic example” (Macmillan’s Dictionary of Anthropology, 1986). Interestingly, anthropologists have generally paid little explicit attention to ethnographies as texts, often treating ethnography as synonymous with fieldwork, or as a method rather than a product of research.

1.2 HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF ETHNOGRAPHY

When we look at the history of anthropology we find that it has complex intellectual roots in the enlightenment and the European discoveries of non-western peoples. Empiricism (or empirical tradition) was a byproduct of this historical development. The pioneering anthropologists were not field researchers and were basing their conclusions on secondary sources. They may be described as ‘arm chair anthropologists’, but the later developments helped develop the tradition of fieldwork and that is how ethnography became a part and parcel of anthropological field research.

Before moving further let us refer to the work of a young French philosopher, Joseph-Marie Degerando who, according to Pelto and Pelto (1997), wrote the first field guide for ethnographers. His *Considerations on the Various Methods to Follow in the Observation of Savage People* was intended as a guide for members of the *Societe de observateurs de l’ Homme* as they embarked on expeditions to Africa and Australia. Degerands (1969) discussed the principal weaknesses in the ethnographic observations of earlier explorers and argued that “the first means to a proper knowledge of the ‘savages’ is to become like one of them, and it is by learning their language that we shall become their follow citizens”. He was especially clear about the importance of studying primitive people within the context of their social systems. He gave detailed suggestions concerning ethnographic observations. But his excellent fieldwork instructions had little effect on the French explorers. “The long forgotten suggestions of Degerando and the earlier ethnographic work provide us with a perspective from which to view contemporary ethnographic activities” (Pelto and Pelto, *ibid*).

Barnard and Spencer (*ibid*) points out that ethnographies as they have evolved over the past century and a half constitute a genre, a form of writing conditioned by the process of knowledge construction epitomised in this anthropological triangle – process/product, comparison and contextualisation. Ethnographies consequently differ from travel writing, gazetteers, interview based surveys, or even the personal fieldwork accounts of anthropologists (which form a separate genre). Ethnography, both as product and process, has a history and pattern of development of its own.

1.2.1 Beginnings of Ethnography as a Specialised Skill for Social Science Research

British and Chicago Schools of ethnography

As already stated ethnography has a distinguished career in social sciences. There have been “travelers’ tales” for centuries which may be counted as the earliest form of ethnography as these purported to represent the social/cultural reality through contacts with and observation of a country, culture or group. However, ethnography began properly during the twentieth century as a result of two independent intellectual developments - British and the other North American. These may also be described as the British and Chicago schools of ethnography. The former was a product of the emergence of the classical tradition of social anthropology in Britain and the latter as Chicago sociological tradition. The British school had close association between social anthropology and British colonialism. While social anthropology is no longer associated with colonialism, its origins were tied to the needs of the British empire to understand the cultures and peoples it was seeking to rule once the period of colonial conquests was completed. While Tylor and Morgan were the first influential writers on the subject of ethnography, it is Malinowski who is credited to have single-handedly contributed to the ethnographic methods.

The second school is related with the University of Chicago which dominated the intellectual and professional landscape of sociology from the last quarter of nineteenth

century until the 1940s. The popular phrase of 'core Chicago ethnographies' is justified by the fact that these were conducted by sociologists affiliated with the University of Chicago. Each one of them analysed everyday life, communities and symbolic interactions characteristic of a specific group. The doctoral students of Robert Park and Ernest Burger produced these ethnographies. They generated a vital picture of urban life grounded in local studies and sympathetic eye on human behaviour. Their contributions to scholarship and a reflective society are now considered as classics throughout the world. These are popularly referred to as the 'Chicago style ethnographies'. These descriptive narratives portrayed 'social worlds' experienced in everyday life within 'modern', often urban, contexts. In these accounts social change, especially disorganising and rapid changes in values and attitudes, was the main area of concern. These studies generally used more statistical data, combining them with a series of qualitative techniques such as interviews, face to face interactions, and life histories. Later, the urban focus was extended to a rural setting.

Methods and Techniques

The methods and techniques of many nineteenth-century ethnographers suffered from the pervasive evolutionist theory leading to a neglect of the contemporaneity of cultures they were studying. The reconstruction of history as a major goal of ethnography endured into the early years of the twentieth century. With the advent of Bronislaw Malinowski and others the amateur, history-oriented ethnography was eclipsed. This happened because of the rise of interest in an ahistorical, 'structural-functional' study of social systems. This reorientation may largely be attributed to the theoretical works by A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski. The origin of the modern ethnographic research tradition is generally traced to Malinowski who as a part of his functionalist theory of society stressed the primacy of field research and participant observation and to Franz Boas who, like Malinowski, reacted against the 'speculative history' of evolutionary theory and advocated the careful description of specific cultures. Thus, ethnography in both American cultural anthropology and British social anthropology from the post-war period onwards acquired generally ahistorical perspective, concentrating on the reconstruction of a specific cultural or social system without regards to its historical development and historical considerations. Moreover, there is also a clear methodological advantage involved in the synchronic study of social life. Thus, the 'ethnographic present' became the dominant style.

Anthropology grew out of the intersection of European discovery, colonialism, and natural science. All of these played their role in reshaping ethnography in one way or the other along with its intellectual roots in enlightenment. In the early part of the twentieth century, anthropology was typically concerned with small scale, technologically simple societies. "In part this was out of a desire to record ways of life that were rapidly changing with the advent of colonialism (although it would be a mistake to assume that these societies were somehow unchanging, or even truly isolated before their contact with the west) and in part it was out of a desire to get the essential or elementary forms of human institutions" (J. Monaghan and Peter Just, 2000).

Reflection

Bronislaw Kaspar Malinowski (1884 – 1942) was born in Krakow, Poland, and settled in Great Britain in 1910. His basic training was in mathematics and physical science but he turned to ethnology because of sheer interest and established himself as a theoretical anthropologist. He carried out his path breaking and legendary fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands between 1915-18 on the basis of which he published a number of books based on this work. It includes such classic ethnographies as *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, *Crime and Custom in Savage Society* and *The Sexual Life of the Savages in North Western Melanesia*. Through his ethnographic works, he raised the status of fieldwork in anthropology to an art or craft. His skill in doing fieldwork through participant observation gave a new dimension to anthropological fieldwork.

1.2.2 Essentials of Ethnography

Modern ethnographic fieldwork involves living in close contact with a population in order to observe their daily routine, ritual and social acts, economic activities, and other aspects of cultural behaviour. This could be possible through “participant observation”. Malinowski is often credited with being the originator or at least the major developer, of this style of fieldwork that involves intensive and long term immersion in the daily lives of native people.

Though some anthropologists before Malinowski conducted fieldwork through native language, spent substantial time in the field and in the process got involved emotionally with the people they studied, yet it was Malinowski who raised the ethnographic fieldwork to the status of an art or craft. The ethnographer Frank Cushing lived for about five years (1880–85) with Zuni Pueblo participating in the life of the people but the strong emphasis on participant observation, owes much to Malinowski.

As the main technique of an ethnographer, participant observation involves living with the people one studies. He/she learns their language and through it learns about their belief and behaviour. The ethnographer participates as he/she observes. Much of his/her research is therefore based on subtle inference that he/she derives from informal situations. The ethnographer may interview formally for particular kind of information or may use questionnaires, psychological tests, or other standardized and relatively rigorous techniques. But regardless of what other methods one may be following he/she is always alert to record the events going on around him/her and understand their significance for particular problems for his/her general understanding of the life of the people. Thus, the ethnographer himself/herself is the most important instrument and the value of the work depends on his/her participating broadly in the life of his/her hosts and sensitively observing what is happening around him/her.

1.2.3 Methodological Concerns

We have to keep several things in mind when we look at the ‘ethnographer at work’. The practice of ethnography is not an easy job. It is more likely that a fieldworker may make all kinds of mistakes. We have to identify the pitfalls to avoid these. When the technique of participant observation requires ‘living like the people’, the fieldworker must maintain flexibility, humility and sensitivity. Establishment of personal rapport is a precondition for successful ethnography. Acceptance of local food and drink is very important. Many ethnographers have reported that their acceptance of local food and drink was the first step to rapport establishment. Sharing food and eating with the population under study immediately brings dividends. It may pose a lot of problems for such ethnographers who are quite rigid and stubborn about accepting food other than their own. It may also involve the question of hygiene and sanitation. A strictly vegetarian and teetotaler ethnographer would be in trouble in such situations. Smoking poses problems for non-smokers.

Participation in local social scene is also of great significance in participant observation. Most of the ethnographers have been following Malinowski’s advice of taking part in day-to-day activities of the people one studies. One has to leave all the gadgets – pen, pencil, camera, voice recorder, etc., on such occasions. The notes may be taken later by recollecting the events and experiences. Through participation in activities the fieldworker sends the signals that he wants to be identified as an insider. Yet, there are always a number of areas of activities where an outsider’s participation or even presence may not be considered desirable. Activities related with religion and ritual obviously come under this category of activities. However, avoidance of authoritarian and judgmental behaviour is a prerequisite for good ethnography. Here comes the role of cultural relativism — the idea that a culture should be understood in its context; there are no universal standards according to which a culture is judged. This idea has led to respect for all cultures.

Some anthropologists look at friendship as ‘a strategy’ for fieldwork. This should not be taken as strategy which sounds selfish. There must be a genuine feeling of friendship which sometimes lead to a situation where the ethnographer may also become a medical aid for the people one studies. This happens when the ethnographer carries medicines for personal use which may also be used for the people if need arises. The ethnographer must ensure that he/she does not betray the friendship formed during fieldwork. In the process ethical questions are also to be encountered.

Reflection

Ethnography and Questions of Ethics: Ethnography poses a number of questions concerning ethics. An ethnographer has no control over who will make use of the data and for what purpose? There is also the problem of privacy. An ethnographic account may be dealing with the private and sensitive matters of a people. What would happen to the privacy of informants. One has to decide about how much of sensitive information has to be included in the report.

In ‘other culture’ studies, participant observation is never easy and the initial stages are the most difficult. These are the problems of living with the strangers. The ethnographer must earn the cooperation and confidence of the people he wishes to study. In this task he must develop friendly and genuine respect for the culture of the people he studies. It also involves the difficult task of ‘impression management’.

Though most of the ethnographic work done by the anthropologists involved simple societies or peasantry but from the second half of the twentieth century a number of ethnographic work concerning urban populations have begun to appear. Liebow’s *Tally Corner* (1968), Keiser’s *The Voice Lords* (1969), Peattie’s *The View from the Barrio* (1968), and Nash’s *A Community in Limbo* (1970) are some such studies. Oscar Lewis’ work under the banner of ‘Culture of Poverty’- *La Vida* and *Children of Sanchez* are famous studies of urban poverty in slums. A number of anthropologists have also published their experiences in ethnographic research. Henry and Saberwal (1969) in *Stress and Response in Fieldwork* gives interesting analysis of psychological and social aspects of ethnographers’ experience. Golde (1970) in *Women in the Field* describes special role conflicts, problems and advantages experienced by female ethnographers. Such narratives, sometimes, paint the picture of an ethnographer as ‘marginal native’.

The end product of an ethnographic exercise is the text which purports to deal with objective facts which means that the text is the result of a serious process of objectivisation and ultimate product of a complex interaction between ‘self’ and the ‘other’. “The convention of fieldwork has some inherent problems that eventually lead to the problem of subjectivity. However careful the ethnographer might be and whatever precautions he might take to be objective and free from all prejudices, there is possibility of subjectivity unconsciously creeping into ethnography” (Misra, 2009). It should be realised that the fulcrum of fieldwork is essentially a human equation — an equation between the researcher and the informants. Since anthropological fieldwork is carried out with people, it has to be collaborative in essence and spirit. In this collaborative exercise, the researcher and his promise to be objective constitute only one half of the possibility of ethnography being free from subjective considerations, as the other half depends entirely on the informants and their resolute commitment to share only objective realities with the researcher. Therefore, it is evident that the outcome of fieldwork depends not only on the skills and motivations of the researcher, but also on the behaviour of the informants.

As far as the time duration of a good or ideal ethnographic fieldwork is concerned it should be at least one calendar year. This gives an opportunity to the ethnographer to interact with the respondents in different parts of the year as the activities vary

from season to season. Thus the behaviour of the people under study in different seasons may be understood. Moreover, a weakness in many ethnographies is that they are derived largely from male informants. This weakness comes from the fact that most anthropologists are male, and hence they find it easier and more acceptable in the local community to work with other males. The problem is further compounded by the fact that men are dominant in almost all societies and tend to monopolise the researchers' time and attention. The presence of the anthropologists' wife (or husband) and even his children can facilitate entry into segments of the society that would otherwise be difficult to deal with.

Writing the ethnography is a crucial part of any anthropological work. *Anthropology Today* (1971) provides prudent and workable guidelines. It says that before the ethnographer can present his/her collection of data in written form, one must analyse the significance of his/her findings. The analysis is the process by which an ethnographer moves from the many observations that had been recorded to the generalised statements about what his/her observations might imply. The analysis actually begins before the first observations are made. Moreover, the theoretical problems and interests the researcher develops before one enters the field determine, in an important way, the sort of findings that will be made by directing ethnographic attention towards some phenomena and away from others. It is impossible to observe everything, however, so there will always be selective observation. In scientific ethnography, this selection is guided by explicit theory. "Anthropology, like all learning, is a social enterprise. Results are cumulative and every study is strengthened by what has been learned in previous studies" (ibid).

When modern anthropology took shape in the early years of the twentieth century there were still large areas that had hardly been visited by Europeans and were much less subjected to systematic exploration. "When Boas studied Indians on the west coast of North America, when Malinowski lived in the Trobriand Islands, when Bateson visited the Iatmul in New Guinea and when Evans-Pritchard went to live among the Azande, they could, only to a limited extent, prepare themselves through reading earlier studies of the same people. They knew comparatively little about the sites they were going to" (T. H. Ericksen, 1995). The world has changed quite dramatically since then. There now exists studies from the region one visits as ethnographer.

1.3 NEW TRENDS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

When we look at the autobiographical accounts of ethnographers we notice that changes have come in fieldwork objectives, techniques, and styles. Pelto and Pelto (ibid) make the following generalisations about recent trends in contemporary ethnographic work:

- 1) Quantification of field observations and increasingly sophisticated "operationalising" of field data have become more usual in ethnographic investigations than they were earlier.
- 2) Much ethnographic research is now focused on urban social systems, complex segments of peasant societies, and other types of 'non-primitive' literate populations.
- 3) The study of social change, modernisation, and social processes looms large in contemporary research partly overshadowing earlier concerns with static, 'equilibrated' social and cultural systems.
- 4) The tendency of ethnographer to identify with 'their people' and to find positive values in their cultural practices has continued but more and more anthropologists now go beyond this passive partisanship, seeking to foster social

changes that would improve the socio-economic situations of their research communities. This trend is related to a series of ethical questions

- 5) In connection with the tendency to press for social action, some contemporary ethnographers are beginning to see themselves as carrying out research for the local communities themselves, rather than simply for their academic peers and perhaps for governmental agencies. Thus, anthropologists have assumed the responsibility of making their research results relevant for and available to the people whose ways of life they have studied.
- 6) Although there continues to be a large number of general descriptive ethnographic studies, many fieldworkers focus their data gathering on one specialised aspect of the socio-cultural system, or on some theoretical problem.
- 7) A general ecological orientation is becoming more common in ethnographic work, bringing with it a much needed reemphasis on physical and biological environment.
- 8) Self-conscious concern and writing about the techniques of field research must also be considered a significant characteristic of the contemporary ethnographic scene. Autobiographical accounts of field experiences are a recent phenomenon.
- 9) Complex ethical and practical questions are posed by anthropologists' involvements in research related to American foreign policy (involvement of some anthropologists in the ongoing war in Afghanistan is a case in point. It generated heated debate in American Anthropological Association and the majority censured such anthropologists).
- 10) Global and Multisited Ethnography Globalisation is now impacting the entire world. It poses a challenge to the existing social scientific methods of enquiry and units of analysis by 'destabilising' the embeddedness of social relations in human groups and places. It thus poses problems for ethnography upsetting ethnographers' claim to understand social relations by being there and thus demands that the practitioners of ethnography rethink the character of global ethnography. Ethnographic sites are now globalised by means of various external connections across multiple spatial scales and porous and contested boundaries. The extension of the site in time and space poses conceptual and practical problems for ethnographers. However, by locating themselves firmly with the time and space of social actors 'living the global' ethnographer can reveal how global processes are collectively and politically constructed, demonstrating the variety of ways in which globalisation is grounded in the local and how the social becomes transnational. Thus a global ethnography may be taken as a response of the ethnographers to the impact of globalisation process that has engulfed all the regions of the world.

Traditional ethnography typically situates a researcher-ethnographer in one field/site for a long period of time. The researcher does not move across many spaces and thus gets to know one setting extremely well. Differing from the traditional ethnography, multisited ethnography follows a research topic across numerous spaces for shorter periods of time. Thus, multisited ethnography may be described as a method of data collection that follows a topic or social problem through different field sites geographically and/or socially. George Marcus (1995:95-117) proposed multisited ethnography as a way to examine global processes and the increasing interconnectedness of all people through the process of globalisation. Marcus maintains that multisited ethnography solves the need for a method to analytically explore transnational processes, groups of people in motion, and ideas that extend over multiple locations. Since multisited ethnography is concerned with movement of ideas, people and commodities, it is closely related to a world systems theory, influenced by Immanuel Wallerstein, which views capitalism as a process without

geographic boundaries. He argues that multisited ethnography allows for a macro-level understanding of a topic. It allows researchers to understand a variety of perspectives. It also enhances our understanding of how power structures from seemingly disconnected spaces ultimately impact a specific population. On a macro level, policies of one nation impacts people in another. The obvious limitation of multisited ethnography is that it has multiple sites and thus prevents researchers from getting to know one site in depth and if a researcher does not get to know a site in depth, the quality of the data may not be as good as the researcher expects. Managing access to multiple sites can also be challenging. Moreover, when using multisited ethnography to compare different groups' answers to the same research questions, there may be problems in obtaining comparable data and difficulties related to translation and cultural appropriateness of questions asked.

1.4 SUMMARY

Ethnography literally means 'a portrait of a people'. It is a written description of a particular culture — the customs, beliefs and behaviour based on information collected through fieldwork. Thus, it is an art of describing a group or culture. It may be conducted in an 'exotic setting' among a primitive tribal group, peasant village, in an urban setting or in an industrial organisation. When used as a method, it refers to fieldwork, based on participant observation by an individual who lives with and tries to live like those who are studied. It is usually for a year or more to observe the behaviour of people in different seasons.

Peoples' behaviour should be studied in everyday contexts rather than under experimental conditions created by the researcher. Data may be gathered from a range of sources but observation and informal conversations are the best and most effective way. Key informants play the most important role and hence they are to be selected wisely and used carefully and intelligently. Building trust and support at an entry stage is most crucial as this will facilitate or ensure the success of an ethnographic exercise.

Ethnographic research usually produces a large amount of qualitative data. Ethnographic research does not usually start from a definite theory. It starts with data and usually without a hypothesis. Thus, analysis and interpretation become very important. Analysis turns raw data into cooked data and results are obtained. Theoretically, there is no end to an ethnographic research. End is often determined by the time and resources available.

Reflection

Though hundreds of ethnographic accounts are available from all over the world, we may have a look at some of the best known ones from different parts of the world and India that would be taken up in this course.

1. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* by Bronislaw Malinowski
2. *The Nuer* by Evans-Pritchard
3. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* by Victor Turner
4. *Death in Banaras* by Jonathan Perry
5. *Coming of Age in Samoa* by Margaret Mead
6. *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure* by Edmund Leach
7. *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* by Serena Nanda
8. *India's Changing Villages* by S. C. Dube
9. *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* by M N Srinivas
10. *Himalyan Polyandry* by D N Majumdar.

References

- Anthropology Today*. 1971. Communications Research Machines, Inc, Del Mar, California.
- Barnard, Alan and Jonathan Spencer (ed.) 1996. *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Degerando, Joseph-Maricie. 1969. *The Observation of Savage Peoples*. Trans and ed. F.C. T. Moore. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Eriksen, Thomas H. 1995. *Small Places, Large Issues: An Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology*. London: Pluto Press.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *Interpretations of Culture: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- Golde, Peggy. (ed). 1970. *Women in the Field*. Chicago: Aldine
- Henry, Frances and Satish Saberwal. 1969. *Stress and Responses in Fieldwork*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Keiser, Lincoln. 1969. *The Voice Lords: Warriors of the Streets*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Lewis, Oscar. 1965. *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in Culture of Poverty*. London: Secker & Warburg.
1972. *The Children of Sanchez*. Hermondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Marcus, George E. 1995. *Ethnography in/of the World Systems: Emergence of Multisited Ethnography*. Annual Review of Anthropology. Vol. 24:95-117.
- Mishra K. K. 2009. 'Ideology and Practice in Ethnographic Research' in (ed.) Eswarappa, Kasi, and R. C. Malik, *Theory and Practice of Ethnography: Readings from the Periphery*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications.
- Monaghan. John and Peter Just. 2000. *Social and Cultural Anthropology: A very short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Peatie, Lisa. 1968. *The View from the Barrio*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Pelto, Pertti J. and Gretel H. Pelto. 1997. 'Ethnography: The Fieldwork Enterprises' in (ed.) J. J. Honigman. *Handbook of Social and Cultural Anthropology*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications.
- Nash, Dennison. 1970. *A Community in Limbo*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Seymour-Smith, Charlotte. 1986. *Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.

Sample Questions

- 1) What is Ethnography? How did it evolve?
- 2) In what way 'Participant Observation' helps an ethnographer get the insiders' view of the people one studies?
- 3) How does a researcher write his ethnographic account?