
UNIT 2 WRITING CULTURES

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Learning Objectives

In this unit, you will learn about the:

- process of creation of an anthropological writing;
- theoretical premises on which this write up in whatever form it is presented is constructed; and
- historical and political parameters that influence anthropological writings and the changes in style over the years.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The finished product of any anthropological research is a write up; either in the form of a report, or a book, or a paper or article; as the case may be.

The main objectives of this lesson are to make the student understand that writing is a process that is different from the process of both data collection and analysis. The manners in which the styles of writings have changed follow the changes in philosophical and paradigmatic shifts in the discipline itself. In this way writing becomes an object of study on its own and that is what we are attempting to do in this unit.

2.2 WRITING CULTURES: AN OVERVIEW

Anthropology depends a lot on the written word. The basic concepts like society and culture do not exist as verifiable physical objects, like a tree, but are constructs available to scholars as propositions and descriptions. Thus when I use a phrase like “Nuer society and culture”, there is nothing on the ground that is so visible, but only what has been constructed and then presented to the academic community. Although anthropology began its existence as a positivist science, the realisation began to draw that what was being presented as objective facts was not a set of objective truths, but a series of interpretations and constructs that had a double level of abstraction, first at the level of the collection of data and secondly at the level of presenting this data in the form of an ethnography. At the first level of abstraction, the anthropologists

sifts through the available sensory information to choose and select some and pass them through his/her cognitive and interpretative screen in the process of identifying what is worth presenting and what is not. At the second level this material is then made suitable in terms of the disciplinary jargon mainly for the benefit of the peer group and fellow academicians. While this works with most other disciplines, in case of social and cultural anthropology it becomes a little more problematic as the subject of study are living human beings and the universe of study, is not passive but consists of fellow humans with both intelligence and agency.

Since most of anthropological data that goes into the making of ethnography is collected by the time tested method of fieldwork, the situation here is not that of an active observer acting from outside of a passive field; but a living encounter with other living and sentient beings. In other words it is an interaction and not merely an act of observation. But towards the middle of the twentieth century, the distinction between literature and scientific writings began to be blurred. Thus reverting to an earlier definition of art, as “skillful functioning of useful artifacts” (Clifford 1986:6), ethnographies can be termed as artifacts as Raymond Williams (c.f. Clifford *ibid*) puts it, “tied to the worldly work of writing”. Thus writing ethnographies has not remained a mere work of recording but has been understood as an art or a skill.

2.2.1 Collecting Data from the Field

Although there was a time, when not only was anthropology accepted as a positivist science the writings of anthropologists were accepted as ‘true accounts’ and not only true, complete accounts of the fields that they visited and often spent many years in study. Thus one would presume that if one read Malinowski or Evans-Pritchard, one would know all that was to know about the Trobrianders or the Nuer. Such presumptions were challenged when fields were revisited by other anthropologists with biographical characters different from that of the original scholars. The Trobriand Islands was for example visited by Annette Weiner, a woman anthropologist who was of a different gender than Malinowski; and she found out data that was pertinent to her own gendered status, in other words she discovered a world of women, that had gone unnoticed by Malinowski, in spite of his rigorous methods. “Ethnographic truths are thus inherently *partial*-committed and incomplete” (emphasis in original text) (Clifford *ibid*: 7). Followed by similar restudies and rethinking about the nature of field data, it is by now fairly well established that there can be no purely ‘objective’ data in social sciences and that whatever we observe in the field is already filtered through our subjective consciousness and then intellectually interpreted in our minds and finally crafted by our academic expertise to finally take the shape of what is presented to the world.

Does that mean that there is no truth at all in what anthropologists write? A statement that again is not true. Anthropological observations are viewed on a purposive viewing, a trained eye that looks for regularities and patterns, that is able to discern and identify some aspects that may not be available to the ordinary viewer. Anthropologists in other words do not just see, they observe. Yet what they describe are not direct observations but the abstracted concepts like, economy, gender, politics, etc. Thus as Peter Winch (1958) had pointed out, “concepts appropriate to the analysis of a social phenomenon are demonstrably incompatible with those used in natural sciences”. The entire process of observation and data collection that forms the basis of ethnographies is ultimately reducible to the mental phenomenon that has two parts, firstly the ‘impressions’ that refer to immediate sensory perceptions and to ‘ideas’ that make sense of the sensory perceptions. No one actually records the raw sensory perceptions but the sense that the mind makes of them. The raw data is always classified into existing categories that makes sense to others. Thus the long existing difference between hard and soft data refers to whether they are purely observational, like astronomy or contain an inferential element, like in all observations of human behaviour. As Kaplan puts it, referring to observations made

by any human, “Seeing is believing because we do not just see something, we see that something is the case — the eye with which we see is itself the mind’s eye, or it would be indeed unseeing” (1964:132).

Thus human beings see only what they expect to see, what they preconceive should be existing and be true, this seeing is also conditioned as Whorf, pointed out by the language by which we describe not only to others, but to ourselves, what we see. For example if in a language there is only one term to describe black and blue, people will also see them as one colour and not two. Thus; “An observation is made; it is the product of an active choice, not of a passive exposure. Observing is a goal directed behaviour” (ibid: 133). Therefore according to Coomb (1964) the term data can only refer to already interpreted observations, in other words there is nothing called raw data, all data has been sifted through the observer’s mind.

However what we say and what we observe makes sense in light of shared humanity of the observer, the observed and the audience to whom the ethnography is directed for consumption.

Evans-Pritchard distinguished the “ethnographic fact” from the “social fact”, as given by Emile Durkheim. The ethnographic fact is something that an anthropologist observes in the field and is historically contextualised, while the social fact is seen as universal and applicable to all human life. According to Evans-Pritchard, witchcraft among the Azande was an ethnographic fact.

2.2.2 What is Ethnography?

The term ethnography refers to a shift in perspective from comparative studies of human cultures and societies that was done when the discipline was ruled by evolutionary theory, to structural functionalism and cultural historical perspectives. From a premise of comparing cultures, the norm of cultural relativism was adapted and detailed study of unique cultures became the standard method of anthropology. Thus cultures were seen either as closed, static systems with interdependent parts or as unique products of their history. In either case a method of constructing a detailed account of one culture by a long term and close association of the scholar with it, as participant observation, gave rise to a product called ethnography.

Thus as Agar (1980:2) describes it, “Ethnography is a ambiguous term, representing both a process and a product”. The product or the writing of the ethnography followed varied patterns through the history of the discipline. The earliest ethnographies that we find in the colonial period were often just recordings made by administrators who made reports of what they thought were disappearing cultures and ways of life, often because of their own policies. Such ethnographies were made from a vantage point of superior power and were often both ethnocentric and racist (Channa, 1992). The so called traditional ethnographies were often cast in the mould of holistic descriptions that assumed an impersonal language towards the “others’ also regarded as inferior and primitive.

This was followed by the rich descriptive ethnographies of the functionalists where the emphasis shifted to external imposition of rationality on all manners of institution and practices. But while everything that the so-called ‘primitives’ did was seen as having a valid point, the rationality was attributed not to the people being studied but to the analyst. Scholars like Evans-Pritchard for example gave excellent explanation for the existence of witchcraft among the Azande, but at the same time denied the existence of witchcraft itself. In other words according to Evans-Pritchard, the rationality of explanation is located in the scientific epistemology of the West and not in that of the informant’s. This is a point disagreed upon by Winch, following Wittgenstein, who maintained that, “cross-cultural interpretation should proceed from exploring the internal logic and meanings of defined speech communities” (Ulin 2001:23). In other words the scholar creates the ethnography to be intelligible

to the language community of his peer group and not of the community he or she is studying. To Winch it is not possible to cross the barrier of the, “fundamental assumptions and interests” (ibid) of the two communities and that it was simply not possible to come to an understanding of Azande witchcraft from western scientific premises. While the former are based on universal rules and the latter derive their meaning through “intersubjective rules”. In other words unlike science that is based upon knowledge of external objects, anthropology is concerned with other humans, and therefore the anthropological relation to the people under study is intersubjective and not a subject-object relationship. This kind of realization completely transformed the trend of ethnographic writings that began to privilege the informant’s voice over that of the anthropologists.

2.2.3 Writing an Ethnography

According to Strathern (1999: 1), anthropological writing derived from fieldwork is ultimately only an “Imaginative re-creation of some of the moments of fieldwork itself”, moreover, “the ideas and narratives which make sense of every day field experience have to be rearranged to make sense in the context of arguments and analyses addressed to another audience”—thus “ethnographic writing creates a second field”. Thus what one reads is not the field as it actually was, but another one, neatly constructed with appropriate terminology for consumption by those who speak the same language as the fieldworker. The two fields are tangentially placed, only touching upon each other at certain points but deviating significantly at other points. The only person who inhabits both is the fieldworker whose subjective consciousness both mediates and creates.

Since the field is not simple or linear, it is a complex situation where things can happen both predictably and unpredictably, one dilemma is always to sift through a myriad of sensory perceptions, to decide what to include, what not to include and also how to include. Since the ultimate aim of any ethnography is to add to knowledge to explain, it is difficult in the face of impinging sensations to decide or even to know, what it is that will explain and what will build up a reasonably realistic description of what is happening in the field.

Since no one really knows what one will come across and things also keep moving while one is observing and in the field, it is upon the intuition of the fieldworker to recognize certain “ethnographic moments” (Strathern, 1999:6), moments that will serve to later bring together both the fact of observation and analysis, that will provide the key to explanation and understanding of certain phenomenon essential to an overall understanding of the culture. One may recreate this moment again and again in the process of writing and use it in a multiple situation of analysis. These can be moments that appear extraordinary or moments that may not take one by surprise when they occur, but in conjunction with other observations, become significant later. While writing even as one deciphers notes and tapes, one may be struck by one of those moments that may have etched themselves in memory. For example while entering the field in an upper Himalayan village I remember coming into a meeting of the local office bearers of the village Panchayat with the district officials and being struck by the dominance of the local women in this meeting. This particular ethnographic moment then led me on to focus on the gender relations and to further analysis in which what I had seen began not only to make for sense but to also support a large part of my subsequent analysis.

Thus while writing we have to sift through hundreds of pages of recorded notes and data in the form of interviews and observations and these have to be snipped and fitted so as to say into a final shape that would make coherent reading and also explain to the best of one’s ability some facts and propositions about the field area. Obviously these propositions are derived from the body of anthropological theory that is available before one begins to do fieldwork, but often certain powerful

ethnographic moments may trigger off an additional or alternative mode of thinking that may give rise to a completely different product than what one had visualised in the first place.

Many anthropological works that are now seen as pioneering were results of fieldwork experience that set the scholars thinking in completely different directions from what they had initially set out to do. Emile Durkheim went to study the religion of the Australian Aborigines to study the origin and evolution of religion from the vantage point of what he thought was one of the most, “primitive” forms of religion but ultimately became a functionalist when he discovered that rituals play a key role in social solidarity and in creating and maintaining the moral order that supports the social order. Similarly Margaret Mead was sent to the New Guineas by her teacher Franz Boas to study adolescent trauma among the tribes there but went on to discover that norms informing femininity and masculinity in those cultures did not conform to what she had been told all along as an American woman, that biology is destiny. She discovered that sex roles and expectations were cultural creations and could vary considerably from culture to culture thereby putting forth the hypothesis that sex roles are culturally derived and temperaments stereotyped as masculine and feminine are not inherent to men and women but something imbibed through culture.

Undoubtedly there were ethnographic moments, insights and intuitions that led the anthropologists on to such changes in their path of reasoning and analysis. But even if not on such a spectacular stage, even at a much more modest scale most anthropologists land up writing about the unforeseen and the unexpected once they enter the field area. While writing we also convert entities, may be actions, animals, trees and humans into objects by a process what Strathern (1999:13) calls “reification”. When an entity assumes a form by which it can be known, then it becomes a thing. When we write ethnography we continuously transform our observations by a process of reification into things. A performance can become a ritual, a marriage or theatre; an object can become a tool, a gift or a deity, depending upon the form that it assumes within the scope of our definition.

However it varies whether we use our own conceptualization of form or that of the community whom we are studying. In earlier ethnographies that were presumed to be based on the positivist method, the reification was done according to the definition of form given by the culture of the anthropologist, so that we could call something by a name such as cross-cousin marriage; an impossibility because in the cultures in which they occurred they were not and could not possibly have been viewed as marriage between consanguine. Similarly when I take students to the field, they often come back saying that things as observed or explained by the people do not “fit” into given categories of text books. Beyond positivism, it is now more acceptable to reify objects according to their form as accepted in the culture in which they occur. Anthropologists have begun to foreground the language of the communities they study rather than reify everything into their own language.

Thus the writing of ethnography is a craft where although it is not supposed to be a work of art, a degree of artistry is involved and at least some anthropologists have been credited with producing works comparable with literature. Whether or not we can attain those heights, it is certainly an end product of creativity and judgment, some of which can be intuitive and some based on one’s analytical skill and some based on one’s subjective consciousness.

2.3 TYPES OF ETHNOGRAPHIES

2.3.1 Positivism and Functionalism

The early ethnographies were based on the theoretical concept of functionalism

that assumed that cultures were bounded, static and homogenous. The term used was holistic and the anthropologist would collect data on all aspects of culture, with the assumption that everything had a role to play in the maintenance of the whole and somehow everything could be shown to have a function. Although excellent ethnographies that are read even today were produced during that period, the criticism came from several quarters. Firstly the assumption of every aspect of culture being harmonious and in equilibrium was shown to be more in the mind of the anthropologist than a ground reality. Most of the ethnographies were produced by scholars who belonged to the colonising countries such as England and France and the communities studied were already under the devastating influence of colonial rule that had played havoc with their populations and ways of life. Many had been almost depopulated by diseases brought in by the white populations, many had suffered loss of their ways of life and livelihood and all were under the impact of the foreign rule. To a scholar like Malinowski, history was equated with literacy (Ulin 2001:36), because following the premise of positivism, they presumed that the knowledge about another society that they were producing was both scientific and objective. In other words the history of an illiterate population could at best be conjectural and not the “real” history of the literate. Further although he professed that the aim of ethnography was to understand the native way of life and their mode of understanding, in actuality he imposed his own analytical understanding upon them, explain for example the role played by magic in gardening activities. Thus to the positivist anthropologists like Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard and Leach, the real illumination of how things worked was with the anthropologist and not with the practitioners of the culture who even if logical were not rational enough to reason why they did things as they did. More critically many of the things that were said to be true or had a real existence for them were regarded as only ‘beliefs’ without any ontological status.

Radcliffe-Brown likewise gave beautiful descriptions of timeless societies of the Andaman Islanders, even as they were almost decimated with measles and other impacts of colonial rule. His analysis also privileged his own objectified view of the universe with no reference to the actual thinking of the native populations. The difference between him and Malinowski was that while the latter explained the existence of institutions such as magic and shamanism as fulfilling individual needs; Radcliffe-Brown like Durkheim focused on the needs of society. The function of taboos for example enhanced the ritual value of things and such values were always attributed to those things that influenced and cemented social relationships. The beautifully crafted ethnographies with their rich and detailed descriptions of life were thus nothing more than constructs that, as shown later by anthropologists such as Wilemsen, ignored pain, suffering and misery to highlight equilibrium.

The notion of history was brought in by Boas, whose theory of cultural particularism was supported by his contention that the uniqueness of each culture was a product of its history. Thus American anthropology had a historical sense right from the beginning and later incorporated the notion of process into that of culture. The emphasis here was also more on culture than on structure. With this cultural approach anthropology moved towards what came to be known as ‘Thick Description’ and an emphasis on meanings as opposed to mere form of relationships. Clifford Geertz himself has given an example of thick description when he says that the mere recording of an act like a wink cannot communicate its real meaning as it occurs as an event. For example it can be a real wink, like communicating directly to the observer, or it can be a theatre where an actor is masquerading a wink, or it can be a mere muscle twitch, an involuntary action with no meaning. Thus any word or expression can also be said with real emotion, with sarcasm, with irony or as a metaphor. It depends upon the context in which the act is situated, so that in thick description one not only merely records an action but its relation with its environment, the context in which it takes place and what the actors and participants

have to say about it. These details that make ethnography rich and meaningful make analyses also fruitful. The richer the data, the more qualitative depth it has, the analysis of it will approximate closer to the reality.

2.3.2 Interpretative

Clifford Geertz has produced some of the most read ethnographies in the discipline, and is a master of what he termed as thick description (a term borrowed from philosopher Gilbert Ryle), an attempt to go into the minutest details of an event in order to elucidate the meaning it has for the actors and how this meaning can be extracted for the purpose of explanation for the readers. His view of culture was to describe it as, “not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one is search of meaning” (Geertz 1973:5). Thick description was likewise looking into the layers of meaning that is imposed on an act, “what we call data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to” (ibid:9).

His ethnographic method consisted of trying to put one’s self in somebody else’s skin in order to bring what is for someone an experience near concept to another for whom, because that person is not part of that situation or culture, an experience distant concept. Ethnography will thus involve not just recording what people say on your face, but how they say it, with what nuances, what shades of meaning and expressions using what kind of symbolism to capture exactly what is actually *meant* rather than what is *said*. Ultimately explanation would mean contextualizing an isolated meaning into the larger context of the meaning system of that culture.

Thus each item of culture, say it is the famous Balinese cock fight or the theatre state of Bali, makes sense against the culture in its entirety, that is one need to move back and forth between the part and the whole in order to explain, what Geertz refers to as the hermeneutic circle (Geertz 1974), something he feels is central to the ethnographic interpretation.

Although Geertz is concerned with the meaning systems generated by a culture, his approach remains positivist as explanation and understanding are located in the scholar and not in the field.

But the debate generated between Evans-Pritchard and Peter Winch about the ontological status of the native’s beliefs is not addressed by him (Ulin1984:46-62). For example Evans-Pritchard explains witchcraft among the Azande as an act that plays a functional role in containing actual hostility and have practical utility, they are not true. Evans-Pritchard is refuting Levy-Bruhl’s contention that the primitive mind is pre-logical, that is it cannot distinguish between fiction and reality; like it does believe that witchcraft is true. But here Winch following Wittgenstein raises the important question as to who is privileged to talk about reality? In other words what Winch is saying is that since western science and Azande witchcraft are two different systems of rationality based on very different premises, they are not comparable. There is no actual basis for doubting the ontological status of Azande witchcraft using western scientific logic or methodology. In other words truth is not context independent but context dependent. Western science is but one of many other systems of thought. Thus Evans-Pritchard tries to make use of what Durkheim has called a social fact; a fact that has a reality outside of the ethnographic context. To him an ethnographic fact is different from a universal social fact in that it is contextualized into the interpretations of the field, yet its analytical position is outside of the consciousness of the informants. Thus while the Azande beliefs in witchcraft are rational within their own system of interpretation, they are not true as per the rationality of western science. The contention of Winch is that western science cannot identify the truth status of any act outside of its own field as for anything to be considered true it has to be situated within and not outside of the fundamental assumptions on which they are based.

Such criticism of the universal acceptance of western science as the only sanctifying system of knowledge has been raised by feminist scholars like Donna Haraway and others, who have shown that knowledge does not have any existence outside of the subjective consciousness of those who produce it, especially as far it concerns the human subject.

2.3.3 Phenomenological

While values, consciousness and meaning became part of the interpretative approach there was one area that was not yet touched namely the variety of ways in which humans can experience the world. According to positivism there can be only one sensory perception for all humans, if there is something out there, everyone will perceive it in the same way. Thus Benton and Craib (2001: 30) tell us based on the observations made by Chomsky and others that, “Our ability to identify people, recognize faces, interpret a landscape, and so on is not just a matter of having sense organs, which are in good order, but it also involves active processes of conceptual ordering and interpretation of which we are mostly unaware. All experience is to some extent shaped by our previously acquired map of the world”.

This would then put into doubt most of scientific explanations as even if what we observe is guided by our basic organising concepts that we acquire rather than have intrinsically as a common human facility. Thus rather than assuming that the world exists as taken for granted, in each instance it is important to understand how ‘the lived world’ of the people we study, is constituted. Many modern ethnographers immerse themselves in the field, to gain the experiential dimension of this construction whereby rather than trying to get an objective view of the world, they try to recreate the subjectivity of experience in a completely reflexive manner. I will give a couple of examples to illustrate this. Sax (2009: 5) writes, “Through sheer intellectual force, thinkers like Foucault and Derrida engendered widespread skepticism about whether we can ever achieve a reasonably accurate, empirical or ‘objective’ view of the world”. In his own fieldwork experience he writes, “I began to feel bad omen everywhere, began to fear that I was headed towards some kind of supernatural disaster-----When I was actually in the field, surrounded by fierce demons and ghosts, my anxiety were often terrible” (ibid:16). It is common for anthropologists to subject themselves to such experiential world that they *feel* rather than observe.

Sarah Caldwell not only recounts her experiences but also exposes her own letters and diaries as part of her ethnography. In other words she makes public what Malinowski wrote in his diary in secret. “My husband especially is having a very hard time adjusting. Besides the disorientation, loneliness and heat, he is extremely jealous towards the men I have to work with... At the same time I am also developing a real love for the goddess Bhagvati. She’s something wild and powerful and ancient... It will be incredibly weird to return to the US after another year of this. I truly feel I am on another planet in another *yuga* (era) altogether” (Caldwell 1999:59).

Another piece from the same ethnography, “One evening at dusk, as we drove to the seashore in a jeep, wind rustling through our hair, the thin skin of my reality was suddenly pierced. As I turned my head, I caught a fleeting glimpse of Bhagvati, red and black coming towards us through a grove of trees.... As we glided through the silent flooded paddy fields, we passed a tiny island with twenty coconut trees growing, miraculously, from its tiny area of soil. Just as our boat approached, a strong wind came up and rustled their leaves uncannily. Again I had feeling of a host of Bhagvatis reaching out to greet me; tall green mothers, roots deep in the moist brown soil, heads touching the sky.” (ibid: 100).

Such kind of critical reflexivity is interspersed with accurate and detailed observations, historical information and descriptions; but the reader is left to make their own conclusions from all this.

In another recent trend anthropologists have also begun to move away from the exotic, as illustrated in both the above examples of western anthropologists working in India, towards day-to-day situations that they may face in their own context. However the term 'exotic' is valid only for the Euro-American anthropologist, a point of view not always made clear, even today. Thus when Marcus (1999:3) writes about the "loss of exotic strangeness", he is of course referring to American anthropologists situated in their own familiar surroundings. Thus what may be still called 'traditional ethnography' continues to be practiced as above in Garhwal and Kerala in India and, new kinds of research projects in anthropology, differently problematized and innovatively conducted" (ibid:7) take us to back yards in New York or London. Doing fieldwork in the late twentieth century world and now the twenty first century has opened up possibilities of living in a world that is getting less and less graspable, where reality is getting ever more complex.

Some ways of dealing with these have been to situate fieldwork in multiple sites instead of one, so that now the idea of multi-cited ethnography is acceptable and is being done. Rather than taking systems or bounded communities as units of study, it has been found more expedient to take social formations as defined by issues and problems, groups that may arise situationally, say refugees or immigrants or gays and people affected by urban projects etc. Since many of them may exhibit dispersed features, they may have to be studied in multiple sites, and locations. The notion of space and time have also undergone conceptual transformation. And one very radical departure is that ethnography has now become *one kind of writing* as among others, from being the *only kind of writing* about people who did not write. Thus people that ethnographers write about are also represented and represent themselves in various forms of writings, literature, prose, poems and essays. So the ethnography need to renegotiate what has already been represented, written about and read about. There are other agents like the legal documents and media that produce powerful rhetoric and representations about say special action groups, identities and situations that then need to be reformulated within the ethnographies, making them far more complex and multi-vocal than those based only on direct observations.

A new kind of issue is now often raised, regarding the situation of the ethnographer, who has moved away from the outsider or objective observer, to the position of one who may be an insider, to the situation under study. Here how does an indigenous scholar write about her own people, a gay anthropologist study other gays and so on, has been a contentious issue but also acceptable as both possible and normal. Thus as Marcus puts it, these new narratives, from differently situated vantage points of study has given rise to changed definitions of what an ethnography based upon, "the profound effect on research of recognizing certain affinities and identifications between the reflexive predicaments of the ethnographer and those he or she studies" (Marcus 1999:27).

In India for example a entire genre of Dalit studies has made a critical statement about the manner in which caste system was studied and represented by the elite. Thus while scholars like Dumont, Srinivas and Beteille have described the logic and rationality of the caste system from structural and functional points of view, often taking into account the scriptural and textual material, they have ignored the experiential realities of caste, especially from the point of view of the oppressed. Thus Dalit scholars and those who have looked at caste from the bottom present a completely different understanding of the institution.

2.3.4 Feminist

Women have brought in a new perspective within the critical scholarship of the deconstruction of traditional ethnography. Scholars like Weiner and Leacock have shown much of conventional ethnography to have been crafted from a male and often white centric point of view. The women had shown that in practically every

field of knowledge production, history, psychology and sociology included, that the truth is differently perceived from a male and a female centric location. According to Bhavnani (1994:29), “feminism is a perspective an ‘achieved status’” that need not confine itself to women. What women highlighted was that differentials of power affected the way one looked at things and also how one did fieldwork, from which vantage point. Since women have consistently faced marginalisation in wherever they have been situated, they became sensitive to the production of knowledge from various marginal locations in the world and worked towards privileging such knowledge. Thus they viewed the communities, people or units of study as active, engaged and in an interactive rather than a hierarchical position as male anthropologists had done in the past. Feminist methodology was part of the critical movement that recognized that analysis is not free from relations of power between the observer and the observed and that one has to actively become conscious of this power situation to make it transparent and hence analytically accessible. For example Harraway (1988) refers to the feminist objectivity as understanding knowledge as ‘situated’. The feminine scholar tries to reinterpret her or his (it is only a methodology, not confined to women) in its historical, locational and social context, not taking the data as given but as a production of an interactive field, as a result of inter-subjective (between informant and fieldworker) interaction. Bhavnani (1994: 34) writes about her field experience in England, “For example, while interviewing young white men, the frequently encountered imbalance of power between white men and black women was potentially both inverted and reproduced in the interviews. My role as student researcher, my age, my assumed class affiliation may have been taken as sources of political domination. However my racialised and gendered ascription suggested the opposite”. Thus Kumkum Bhavnani is a coloured and a woman (both negative characters) but she is also educated, middle class and a researcher (all dominant characters); thus her fieldwork would have been conditioned by all these contradictory statements about her position and that of her informants.

Reflection

Challenge to Ethnography: The major challenge to traditional ethnography of holistic exploration of everyday lives and worldviews of people belonging to other cultures came with the emergence of multi-culturalism. As stated by Parekh, 2000 multicultural societies have brought up problems that have no parallel in history. Multi-cultural societies with the impact of globalization have introduced a new set of values, ways of thoughts, political and economic networks and life styles that poses a major challenge to ethnographers in studying cultural identity. The present trend of ‘global culture’ or ‘one culture’ is posing a real threat to the ethnographic presentation of cultures.

2.4 SUMMARY

Writing an ethnography as we have seen is not a simple procedure. There are multiple issues involved as much as we are humans writing about other humans; and as modern ethnography or anthropology makes possible, about people with whom we belong. Ethnography has ceased to be the documentation of the lives of ‘others’ and the exotic, it has become the medium through which the ethnographer presents the voice of certain categories or communities or people to the readers. Responsible ethnography today is both humanistic that is recognising the humanity of those written about and also honest to oneself and to others. This can be seen as a challenge as ethnography has assumed political dimensions and raises critical issues than being simply a passive technical tool. The ethnographer has to deal with ethical questions, such as his or her right to information about the people being studied. One has to be careful of aspects such as Intellectual Property Rights, infringement of human rights and of any possible damage to the informants as a result of the investigation. In an increasingly globalised world, there is a great deal of interconnectivity and any irresponsible action or statement can have snowballing effect.

The contemporary anthropologists must make their own subjectivity transparent and acknowledge power hierarchies where they exist. They may not shy away from being ethnical and value based as ethnography is no longer regarded as a value neutral scientific endeavour.

We have seen that the writing of ethnographies have changed with the historical changes in power relations and the world in general. From colonial anthropology to the present day world of negotiated power relations the situation has changed to where one kind of voice could be heard to where a large number of earlier unheard of voices are making their claim to being heard. The anthropologist is now encouraged to acknowledge his or her own humanity and even to take sides and make value based judgments. Multiple voices from the field are recorded to produce a collage rather than a neat circumscribed account of a culture. Thus responsible writing in the political sense of the term is what is required of an ethnographer.

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Sample Questions

- 1) Critically discuss the concept of ethnography.
- 2) What was the positivist approach to writing ethnography?
- 3) What was the debate regarding the truth status of witchcraft?
- 4) What are the changes in ethnographic writing brought about by globalisation?

