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## UNIT 13 DOING FIELDWORK

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### Contents

- 13.0 Introduction
- 13.1 What is Field in Anthropology?
- 13.2 Preparation for Fieldwork
  - 13.2.1 Formulating a Research Design
  - 13.2.2 Literature Review
- 13.3 Essence of Fieldwork
  - 13.3.1 Rapport Building
  - 13.3.2 Collecting Data
  - 13.3.3 Maintaining Field Diary
  - 13.3.4 Field Gadgets
- 13.4 After Fieldwork What Next?
  - 13.4.1 Data Compilation and Analysis
  - 13.4.2 Report Writing
- 13.5 Summary
- 13.6 References
- 13.7 Answers to Check Your Progress

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### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit the learner would be able to comprehend:

- how fieldwork is conducted within the discipline of anthropology;
- the preparations that have to be done before embarking on fieldwork;
- steps to follow while conducting a fieldwork; and
- the importance of data compilation, analysing data and report writing after the fieldwork.

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### 13.0 INTRODUCTION

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Fieldwork is an integral part of anthropological studies. In the earlier unit, we tried to give you the genesis of fieldwork tradition in anthropology as well as the history of fieldwork, and introduced you to the early anthropologists who had conducted empirical fieldwork. Today fieldwork has become a legacy of anthropological studies. By now you must be wondering how to conduct fieldwork? Can one just enter a space like a village, school or tribal society and do fieldwork? Well, the answer is no, one needs elaborate preparation before embarking on fieldwork. So, in this unit, we will introduce you to the methods and preparation of how to conduct a fieldwork. The unit will help you to understand the requirements, the groundwork that is required before one commences for fieldwork and how after returning from fieldwork the data is compiled, analysed and a report is written; what we call as writing up. The

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basic requirements like formulating a research design, identifying a research problem, reviewing literatures to understand the research questions, the preparations that are required for going on a fieldwork, rapport building in the field, methods used in collecting data, maintaining a field diary, what one needs to do after returning from field, analysing the data collected in the field and finally writing up to present one's thesis/ report/ project work will be dealt with in this unit. For better understanding the unit is divided into three sections, pertaining to the activities one needs to do before, during and after fieldwork.

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### **13.1 WHAT IS FIELD IN ANTHROPOLOGY?**

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Before we embark on fieldwork let us understand the meaning of the term field in anthropological parlance. As discussed in the earlier unit, ethnographic enquiry or what is popularly known as fieldwork since the time of the founding fathers of anthropological fieldwork, namely Haddon, Radcliffe-Brown, Rivers, Boas and Malinowski; involves going off to a far of "exotic" place staying with the "natives" for long extended period of time. As Malinowski in his work *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific* had stated that "one has to cut oneself off from the company of other white men, and remaining in as close contact with the natives as possible, which really can only be achieved by camping right in their villages" (Malinowski, 1922: 6). These studies had focused on the in-depth understanding of the lives and culture of the "other" who presumably were not 'white'. Since these early fieldworks were done during the colonial era, the 'other' refers to the society visited by the anthropologists which was a non-western and often colonised place. However, in the recent past the emphasis has shifted from the 'other' to the 'self', anthropologists are now writing accounts from their lived experiences, often in their own society. The anthropologists are no longer outsiders but insiders, telling the story from the insider's view. The need by the native anthropologists to research on their own societies was felt mostly to counter the colonial write-ups and to present their own 'insider view' stories. Even while studying other societies, the informants or the people being studied are brought to the forefront as narrators. This has led to a tremendous change in the concept and perception of a field in the present day. In the twenty first century, the field in anthropology can be an organisation, an institution, a rural or urban site, the virtual world, one's own people, village or family. An anthropologist may work at more than one site or space commonly known as multi-sited fieldwork and the very recent trend of researching the 'self' popularly known as auto-ethnography. Thus, a field in the anthropological sense can be any space that is related to human activities and can be situated anywhere.

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### **13.2 PREPARATION FOR FIELDWORK**

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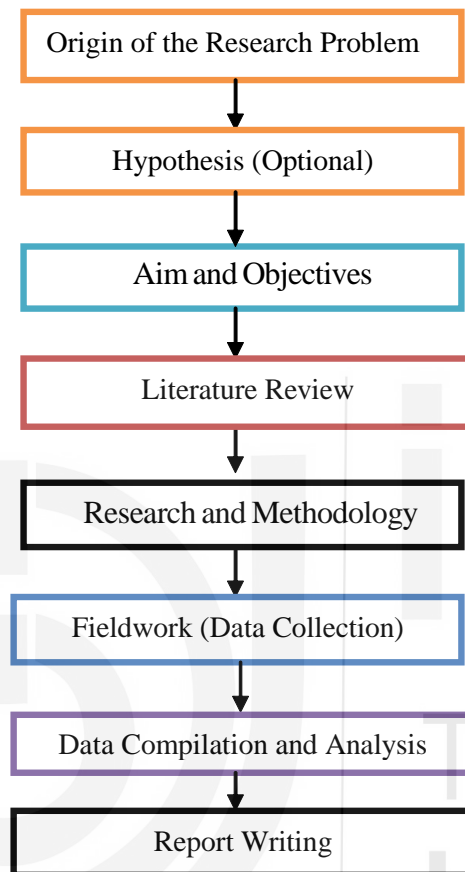
Now we will be discussing how one prepares for field. One cannot just select a place and go for fieldwork, it has to be planned and there are many stages and steps involved in planning for a fieldwork. One first needs to assess the relevance of why a fieldwork is to be undertaken. The basic questions a researcher needs to first find answers to are: a. why to undertake a field study? b. where to conduct a field study and c. how to carry out the fieldwork? This section will deal with how a researcher prepares for fieldwork. The steps would be discussed in length.

#### **13.2.1 Formulating a Research Design**

First, we need to have a detailed plan and understanding of every step of doing the fieldwork. Thus the initial step is to formulate a research design, which is the step by

step guide as to how research is to be conducted. It is the framework which gives the gist of how a research is being conducted. The research design includes the basic objectives of the research, how the research would be conducted, where it would be conducted, the tools and techniques that would be used in the field, compilation and analysis of the data collected from the field. Let's us try to understand the steps involved in formulating the research design through a diagram.

#### DIAGRAM: RESEARCH DESIGN



Looking at the diagram one can clearly make out that the first and foremost requirement for a fieldwork is a research question. A researcher before embarking on fieldwork first needs to identify a problem, based on which the researcher may formulate a hypothesis. A hypothesis is a tentative relation between the variables that we are looking at in the field. The hypothesis formulation is not an essential criteria for qualitative research as it can be an exploratory research. Whether or not one formulates a hypothesis it is essential to describe the aims and objectives of why the research needs to be done. Thus the rationale of why this research is necessary and also how it can be justified as an anthropological research is the very first step.

At the same time one must also identify the universe which refers to the people or place on which the research is to be conducted. The universe can be a physical region, like a village or urban neighbourhood for example, or it can be a population like say football players; research can also be conducted at multiple sites, like one can follow migrants on their journey and so on. The choice of the universe is directly and logically connected to the nature of the problem. The universe in fact is the field to which we refer when we use the term fieldwork.

This is followed by a review of existing literature known as a literature review. Literature review allows the researcher to understand the type of work that has

been already done on the subject and identify the gaps that would make the researchers work more meaningful. After collecting existing literature on the subject, the next step is formulating the research methodology as to how the researcher would carry out the research work. This is followed by detailing out how fieldwork would be conducted and the data collected. The next step in the research design is data compilation and analysis which leads to finally writing up the report. These steps of how to create the research design and execute it in the field will be discussed in the following sections. In this section identifying a research problem and literature review is being discussed as these are steps that one needs to complete before going for fieldwork.

### **13.2.1.1 Identifying a Research Problem**

For doing fieldwork the first requirement is identifying a research problem or question. What is a research question and how do we identify a research question, what are the criteria or benchmarks that one needs to keep in mind while formulating a research question will be discussed in this section. Research question can be on any topic that is relevant, can be justified and related to human beings. For example, we can choose a research question like migration patterns of daily wage labourers to big cities. One must be able to define and conceptualise each item of the research problem. For example, we must first define the term daily wage labourers, in terms of the kind of work they do, the nature of their livelihood and also what is meant by migration. The literature that we have read will be very helpful in this regard. In this research question, we first need to understand why we want to study the migration pattern, and why we are using the term pattern? Migration, as we know, is a phenomenon and it is happening since time immemorial. People have been moving from one place to another in search of new land, food and work. However, when we say migration pattern we would basically be looking at the migration trends- like seasonal migration etc. Once a research problem is identified the next step for the researcher would be to look up at the work that has already been done in this field by other scholars. The identification of the research problem is closely associated with the interests of the researcher; whether s/he wants to do exploratory research, action research or a purely analytical theoretical research.

### **13.2.2 Literature Review**

Once we select and identify a research problem for our study we need to do a background search in terms of what other research has been done in the same field. This is known as a literature review. Literature review helps in understanding how the research problem has been looked at by other researchers and what are the gaps that are there. It basically strengthens our research work and facilitates in doing away with repetitions. For example, if we take up a topic like 'Facebook and virtual friends' and start working on this project without searching and reading about literature on the same topic, we might end up replicating someone else's work which is equivalent to reinventing the wheel again. So, literature review underlines the work that has already been done and helps one to formulate questions from the gaps of other studies. As in the present world, everything and anything has been explored and the challenge of a researcher is to find gaps and explore those areas that need more attention and can be looked at from a different perspective. It also helps us in identifying a theoretical approach that we may use and also guide us in defining and understanding concepts.

Many times literature review has been contested at ethical levels and it has been reported as inappropriate while conducting a qualitative research. The argument

was in the lines of having preconceived ideas about the field if one indulges in literature review before embarking on fieldwork. However, this has been negated as in terms of a researcher spending time, energy and money on scientific research work as it could lead to replication and duplication of data and information that already exist. One has to start work at a level that has not been touched by other researchers and for that literature review, accumulating knowledge about previous work done is essential. A literature review is also a continuous process and one needs to be aware of all work that is being done even during the period of fieldwork. One needs to include literature from other disciplines also so as to understand how the topic has been dealt with by other disciplines. Like from what perspective an economist or a social worker would look at migration. A literature review is required even after coming back from fieldwork, as during that time many new research works might have been published. It is always advisable to be abreast with the latest knowledge in circulation and incorporate as much as possible in one's research work and at the same time avoid duplication.

**Check Your Progress 1**

1. What is Fieldwork?

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2. What is meant by field in anthropology?

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3. List some spaces where anthropologists may conduct fieldwork.

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4. 'Literature review is not conducted by anthropologists.' State whether the following statement is true or false.

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**13.3 ESSENCE OF FIELDWORK**

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Once the research problem has been identified, based on literature review gaps are analysed and aims and objectives of the study is formulated. The very nature of anthropological theory and the goals of the discipline require that one conducts fieldwork. What does an anthropologist do in the field? Anthropologists collect data

related to the aims and objectives of the problem identified in the research design. In this section, we would learn how an anthropologist approaches a field, collects information while living in close proximity with the people under study.

### **13.3.1 Rapport Building**

*Rapporter* is an old French word that literally means to bring back (webster.com). Rapport building is one of the important process in fieldwork, through which anthropologists gain access to a community or universe, and are able to bring back information and data. The aim of rapport is to create a harmonious and friendly relation with people. Creating rapport helps in building trust, belief and confidence among two or more persons in a way that facilitates the flow of information both ways. So, the question here is how to build rapport.

Let's take an example, say you are walking in a street and a person comes up and suddenly starts questioning you, what is your name? age? etc., or says "Give me your hand. I need to prick your finger as I have to collect your blood sample". How would you feel? Will you answer the questions or allow the person to collect your blood sample? You will feel threatened and uncomfortable in such a situation. In a second scenario if the same person had first introduced him/herself, given you the purpose of the questions or the reason why s/he needs to collect blood sample, taken your consent and asked if you were willing to spare a few minutes of your time for the interview or to give the blood sample and then started the interview or drawn the blood sample, you would have been in a much more comfortable position and responded without fear or discomfort. Same is the case when we are in the field, we just cannot barge into our field space and start questioning people. We first need to introduce ourselves, talk about the purpose of our visit and most importantly connect with the people. Once we gain permission and their trust we can start our fieldwork. This is the process of rapport building where we spend time with our respondents and informants and give them a chance to understand our work. Rapport building is a two-way process where the fieldworker is also being observed and questioned by the people in the field. It is the time when the researcher tries to learn the customs, manners and the way of life of the people so that s/he can move around freely with the people. During the period of rapport building, many anthropologists try to pick up the local language. Rapport building is a continuous process and one must try to build a relationship of trust and understanding with the respondents throughout the period of fieldwork. The most successful rapport building leads to a situation of empathy when one is able to understand the other even without actually asking questions or talking. The fact still remains that no class or lecture can prepare a fieldworker to the kind of field situation one might face. Every field is unique in itself and every day in the field yields a new kind of challenge and response, as aptly stated by Channa 2015 'the field is predictably unpredictable.'

### **13.3.2 Collecting Data**

Once we connect with the local community or the people we are going to study through establishing rapport, the next step is data collection. In the field, primary data is collected which includes direct interaction with the informants. The basic tool used by anthropologists to collect data in the field is observation followed by interview.

**Observation:** Observation are of three types. a. Participant observation; b. Non-participant observation; and c. Quasi participant observation. Participant observation as we had learnt in the previous unit owes its origin to Malinowski who participated in the activities of the community under study and tried to live as one among them. In

non-participant observation the researcher observes the activities of the community under study from a distance without getting directly involved. In most cases the observation conducted by researchers in the field is known as Quasi Participant Observation at many times it is not possible for the researcher to get directly involved in the field situation. For example, while studying the marriage rituals say you attend a wedding ceremony. As a researcher you can observe the rituals being performed, the *mantras* (chants) being chanted by the *pandit* (priest) and the participation of the bride and groom in the different rituals. Here though the researcher is directly observing yet it is not complete participation as s/he can't chant the *mantras* being chanted by the *pandit* or perform the rituals that involves the bride and the groom like taking the vows etc.

**Interview:** There are many ways of conducting an interview and also there are many types of interviews. a. direct interview and b. indirect interview are two of the basic interview techniques. In direct interview, the researcher meets the informant and conducts a face to face interview. While in an indirect interview the researcher can either send the interview questions to the informant via mail/post, email or conduct a video, web or telephonic interview. During fieldwork as the researcher is present in the field, direct interview is the norm. Life history, case study and focus group discussions are the different types of interviews that a researcher uses based on the requirement of the problem identified. These aspects will be dealt with in detail in the next unit.

**Techniques of conducting interview:** In order to conduct an interview we need to have a systematic approach. Questions are formulated so that the researcher is able to acquire relevant information from the informants during an interview. Different types of interview schedule and guides are prepared as per the requirement of the research work.

For direct interview, either a structured interview schedule or unstructured interview guide is prepared by the researcher. A structured interview schedule has a fixed format of questions that the researcher uses while conducting an interview. The unstructured interview guide is used for taking interviews where a strict format is not followed and the interview can be free-flowing. While conducting interviews in the virtual space a questionnaire is used. A questionnaire has a fixed format with objective type questions which requires the respondent to reply with either 'yes' or 'no'. Subjective type questions are not included in a questionnaire, though presently the trend is changing and many are also including the same.

### 13.3.3 Maintaining Field Diary

A researcher's friend is the field diary, space where the researcher can write about one's innermost feelings, understanding of the field and the day to day activities in the field. It is very essential to maintain a field diary during the period of fieldwork. One of the basic reasons is that we spend nearly a week to a few months in the field, and if we don't keep an account of the activities on a daily basis we are likely to forget each day's happenings in the long run. When we return from our field and start working on data compiling, the field diary comes in handy. As one flips through the pages of the diary, it helps in remembering many of the incidents and activities that otherwise we might forget or miss out in the hustle and bustle of everyday life. The field notes help us revisit the field at a later date, reviving the memories of the field, which help immensely in writing up the field report, project or dissertation.

So the next question is how to maintain a field diary? Do we write every incident or event as it happens? Well, it is always advisable to jot down the activities of the day

in the diary at the end of each field day. One must write when one is alone and can recollect the day's activities. Most times during an interview if we start writing in our diaries, it might make the informant conscious and the easy flow of a conversation might be lost. Again if we are continuously jotting down in our diaries we would miss out on the facial expressions of the informant during a conversation. Observation plays an important role during interviews, in conversations facial expressions many times reveal the innermost feelings of a person. However, we can always jot down a few points during an interview if we want to quote verbatim. So, it is always advisable to maintain a field diary while doing fieldwork, as the field diary is the mirror of the researcher's days spent in the field.

**13.3.4 Field Gadgets**

In the field, a researcher carries not only the field diary but equipment to capture data via still photography using the camera or video recorder and audio recorders for the interviews. As a researcher one needs to be very careful while using the equipments and one of the first steps is to take consent of the informant who would be filmed or their interview would be taped. The use of the equipments lies totally on the consent of the informant, if at any point of time the informant expresses the desire not to be filmed or audio taped the researcher has to agree to the same. Still photography has always been in use however, visual anthropology today has opened up new avenues for the researcher to document the lives of the people.

**Check Your Progress 2**

- 5. What is the essence of anthropology?  
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- 6. What is rapport building?  
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- 7. Do we need to maintain a field diary during fieldwork?  
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- 8. 'Anthropologists uses still photography, audio- video tapes during data collection.' State whether the following statement is true or false.  
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## 13.4 AFTER FIELDWORK WHAT NEXT?

Till now we have been discussing on fieldwork and data collection. In this section, we would discuss what to do with the information and data collected. This portion would deal with how data is first sorted, compiled, analysed and how after the data is analysed the report is to be prepared.

### 13.4.1 Data Compilation and Analysis

In the field we collect various types of data and the first thing we need to do is the sorting of data. Relying on the research design we need to first sort the qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative and quantitative data needs to be sorted separately as the analysis process is different for them.

#### *Reflection*

Quantitative data comprises of data that can be counted in terms of numbers like the number of people living in a house, number of people in the village, the number of children going to school etc. Qualitative data reflects on the qualities that cannot be quantified. It also includes the descriptive data. For example, if a researcher is working on the emotional after-effects of the Bhopal Gas tragedy that happened in the 80s, the emotional experience of those affected cannot be quantified, but can be related in the form of a narrative where an informant shares his/her emotional attachment to the episode. It will also include the observations in a description of what the researcher observes about the place and people. In this case it will include descriptions of how the people are living, how they are coping, what kind of expressions they carry with them and also about performances and actions that are seen by the fieldworker.

Quantitative data needs to be sequenced and analysed using the various analytical tools. Earlier it was done manually, where statistical formulas were used and graphs prepared. However, today in the age of computers we have software like Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for data analysis which minimizes manual work and saves time. For the qualitative data like the case study or the life history, it has to be written based on the interviews and conversations with the informants. For qualitative data most times we rely on our recorded conversations and observations that we write down descriptively although as accurately as possible. The need for analyses and interpretation of qualitative data is highly intuitive and often different anthropologists may come up with different interpretations. However to get rid of what is known as subjective bias, one must also clearly state why one is interpreting in the way one is doing.

### 13.4.2 Report Writing

Once the data has been sorted, compiled and analysed we need to put it in a sequential format and present the same in a write-up. You must have come across the term 'writer's block' referring to a stage where the writer is not able to comprehend where to begin and what to write. It is one of the most common issues when it comes to writing. We have collected data, we have analysed our data but we are not sure as to how to present the same. In such a case two types of writing styles are listed to help young writers.

Basically, the writing stage can be done in two ways. One where we start writing in a free-flowing manner starting with the data collected in the field and later put it in a sequence which is also known as writing up. The best way to start this is by revisiting

the field through our field diary and write about incidents and events that we feel are important for the presentation. Many researchers start with writing about their first day's impression of the field. This can later be put in a sequence and the flow for the report can be created. The other way is we first formulate a framework and start writing in the pattern known as writing down. Whichever method one follows the main points to keep in mind is that the writing should have an introduction followed by aims and objectives, fieldwork and methods, data analysis and summary.

**Check Your Progress 3**

- 9. What are qualitative and quantitative data?

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- 10. 'Anthropologists compile, analyse and write a report/thesis on the basis of the data collected from the field'. State whether this statement is true or false.

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**13.5 SUMMARY**

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Now let us quickly summarise what we have been reading in this unit. This unit on doing fieldwork is an understanding of how one needs to approach a field. The unit explained in detail the various steps involved in preparing for a field, how to make a research design, identify a research problem and how to approach the problem. The relevance of literature review has been taken up in this unit. We have tried to guide you as to how as a researcher you can plan and conduct a research. In the next unit we will be discussing in length how data is collected in the field using various types of tools and techniques by a social or a cultural anthropologist during fieldwork.

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**13.6 REFERENCES**

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**13.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

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- 1. Please see section 13.0 for more details
- 2. Please see section 13.1 for more details

3. Please see section 13.1 for more details
4. False
5. Fieldwork
6. Please see section 13.3.1 for more details
7. Yes
8. True
9. See section 13.4.1
10. True



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