
UNIT 3 HISTORY OF RESEARCH IN ANTHROPOLOGY

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Learning Outcomes

After reading this unit, the student will learn to:

- Define research objectives and methodologies developed in social anthropology;
- Explain the divergent trends that developed in America and in Great Britain;
- Describe how present anthropology is globally applicable;
- Learn how the history of research is classified into colonial anthropology, post-colonial anthropology and contemporary anthropology;
- Identify how it has been and is influenced by post modernism and post-structuralism; and
- Classify its role in the development of humanist goals.

3.0 INTRODUCTION

The primary goal of anthropology as a discipline was to formulate a scientific explanation for both human evolution and human diversity, biological (race) and cultural. Over the years, with the development of human genetics and with the human genome project, the racial divisions are being seen as superficial differences, more in the line of family resemblances and the focus has remained on physical and cultural evolution as well as social and cultural diversity.

It is no secret that much impetus to anthropology came from the Colonial administrators who needed to understand the societies they were going to govern. In India, anthropological investigations began with British administrators like J.H. Hutton, J.P. Mills, H.H. Risley and others; who combined raids and other means of coercion of the native populations with collection of trophies and also

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data about lifestyles. There was no specific academic focus except the urgency felt by these officials that a way of life was disappearing and the least they could do was to preserve the records in their writings and in their museums.

3.1 COLONIAL PERIOD

The early part of this period saw the development of two major schools of thought, evolutionism and diffusionism. Both of these were based on the collection of secondary data, from travelogues, reports of missionaries and anything else that could be utilised to create grand theories of human diversity. Since the scholars were convinced that they were developing a science, they made use of the comparative method as used in natural sciences to build typologies, classify and aim towards one grand generalising theory that would explain everything. Research meant the comparison of enormous quantities of secondary data in order to classify and attempt explanations. The evolutionists explained similarities by parallel emergence of ideas based on the premise of a psychic unity of humankind and diffusionists were more inclined towards limited creativity and more of contact. In India, diffusionism was quite popular and many scholars such as Irawati Karve and B.S. Guha were under the influence of the German school of Diffusionism. Karve used the comparative method to create a regional typology of kinship in India, while Guha tried to explain physical characters through diffusion such as his work on the “Negrito” problem in India.

Lewis Henry Morgan in America and A.C Haddon in England led the path in doing field research. Morgan began to study the Native Americans near his home in order to study their kinship terminologies and came to be known as the father of kinship studies and at the same time was established as a renowned evolutionist by giving his theory of ethnical periods. Morgan had also used the questionnaire method and study of secondary sources to carry out a comparative study of kinship terms that enabled him to establish the existence of regular patterns of kinship terminologies that he named as kinship systems. A.C. Haddon of Cambridge University in England went on a trip to Torres Strait islands initially to collect biological specimen. But he was so impressed by the islanders that in his next trip he took with him some distinguished psychologists, namely W.H.R Rivers, C.S. Myers, W. Mc. Dougall and C.S. Seligman of the London School of Economics to conduct psychological tests on these islanders. On this second expedition, that took place in 1898, Rivers developed his famous Genealogical Method. He was trying to make family trees in order to trace the psychological types in a family but later realised the great potential of this method to collect all kinds of data.

In India, among the first to do fieldwork and collect first hand data about aboriginal populations was Sarat Chandra Roy, an aristocratic scholar with deep love for the people of his land. S.C. Roy not only recorded in details the life styles of the communities such as the Birhors and the Baigas, he also emphasised on their humanity and also their sufferings and marginalisation. In many ways Roy was a pioneer of ethnographic research in India and while following the general trend of doing research in those times, like recording all aspects of the physical, social, cultural and material aspects of life nevertheless had a native perspective on the plight of the tribals and did not subscribe to the view that they were primitive or backward.

In the initial period of research, anthropology established its research by hit and trial methods, like the Torres Strait expedition and then the famous ethnographic fieldwork by Malinowski that too was result of a historical circumstance and not a well thought out plan. Malinowski's forced exile in the Trobriand Islands during the First World War led to the establishment of what is now known as participant observation. Anthropologists realised that it was no use trying to reconstruct histories and past of cultures that only led to speculations. After Malinowski, it was considered better to observe and understand a society as it could be studied in real time. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, under the influence of French functionalists formulated his structural-functional approach, wherein every aspect of society was viewed as one part of an overall structure, called as social structure, and contributed to its functioning as a harmonious system. Thus research became focused on a deep and long term association with a particular society and individual scholars by virtue of spending long periods of time with 'their people' became kind of authorities on specific communities so that one would talk about the Nuer of Evans-Pritchard and Andaman Islanders of A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, as if they had intellectual ownership of these people. The emphasis on stability and social solidarity was also seen as the ideal condition towards which the colonial regime aspired.

An alternate stream developed in America led by Franz Boas, that of historical particularism. This school was a by-product of American form of colonisation where entire societies of the Native Americans had been either decimated or the people put into reservations. Unlike the functional school Boas stressed on history, psychology and environment, in the study of cultures. There was also great concern with folklore and material culture as in the absence of the people themselves, which were seen as cultural elements that survived the human communities. Alfred Kroeber, a famous student of Boas postulated his definition of culture as 'super-organic' and 'superhuman'. Boas was interested in psychology and encouraged his students, Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Alfred Irving Hallowell, Ralph Linton and others to develop the culture and personality school. Unlike British social anthropology that kept to social and cultural variables, exclusively in their explanations, American cultural tradition incorporated psychology, biology and environmental variables in their theory and explanation. It was through this tradition that different branches of anthropology such as folklore studies, ecological anthropology, psychological anthropology and medical anthropology first developed and were later accepted globally as different branches of anthropology. These formative years of research were also devoted to search for methods, seeking answers to questions and pushing the boundaries of the discipline to seek new horizons.

Yet there were deep flaws in these researches as they projected an ideal picture of static, ahistorical societies forever in a state of harmony. The assumption that stability is the natural condition of any society was challenged by later researchers. But functionalism was prevalent for a long time as even scholars focusing on conflict looked for the functions of conflict or projected conflict as a natural state of society. It was only in the post-colonial period, when anthropological research began to be done from those regions and by those earlier providing 'objects' for study, such as the natives of the colonies earlier forming the 'field' of the anthropologist that new and critical perspectives emerged in anthropological research.

Check Your Progress

1. How did anthropology gain recognition as a discipline during the colonial period? Who were the early anthropologists?

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2. What were the two major directions of anthropological research during this period?

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3. What were some of the major criticisms directed towards research done during the colonial period?

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3.2 POST-COLONIAL PERIOD

Scholars like Edward Said critiqued the western construct of non-western societies to say that what was constructed and projected was more about what the western people imagined these ‘other’ cultures to be , than what they were actually like. The Feminist critique too was directed against both euro-centrism as well as the predominance of androcentric perspectives. These critiques were generally directed towards the creation of knowledge from centers of power and the neglect of voices from the margins. With more scholars joining from those societies that were earlier treated as objects of study and constituted the ‘other cultures’ of anthropology, the changes in perspective were inevitable. The functional anthropologists were criticised for neglecting history, of turning a blind eye to the havoc caused by colonial rule when they were describing societies as harmonious and in equilibrium. With his classic work, *Europe and the People without History* (1982), Eric Wolf, described the history that people all over the world had, before they came in contact with Europe. It was euro-centrism that had prevented the western scholars to realise that these societies had a history that was independent of Europe. That cultures had interacted, engaged in trade

and travelled and migrated. Some of the labels that had been created during the colonial period such as that of 'acephalous' society, or societies without rulers, was attributed to the impact of colonial rule. Earlier prosperous and populous kingdoms as in Africa, were reduced to headless and depopulated communities that were scattered in the bushes when the anthropologists came to study them. By freezing these communities in the time period in which they were studied, the anthropologists had robbed them of their history and humanity.

The critical transitions in the post-colonial period was when the 'natives' of the colonies became anthropologists and began to study their own societies. M.N. Srinivas was a student of A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and followed the structural-functional model in his study of the Coorgs in India. But as an indigenous anthropologist he formulated theories about caste that provided an insider's insights including reviving the native terms 'jati' and 'varna'. The British school had strong influence on Indian academics and the structural functional school influenced many anthropologists but at the same time the Indian anthropologists made some significant contributions developing concepts and ideas that were specifically related to the local context. One such contribution was the concept of 'sacred complex' given by L.P. Vidyarthi (1961) with respect to Gaya, Bihar. Vidyarthi was influenced by the work of Robert Redfield and the Chicago School. The concept of 'sacred complex' brings together the interrelated concepts of sacred geography, sacred specialists and sacred performances. It shows how these sacred complexes form nodal points for meeting of different classes, castes and communities are also points of creation. Following Vidyarthi, the sacred complex concept was used by other scholars for other sacred centers of India, including the work on Gaya by Baidyanath Saraswati.

However anthropology in India retained its positivist character and although there was strong influence of both British classical theories and American cultural tradition, the anthropologists attempted to focus on those aspects of Indian society that were relevant in the Indian context. Thus following caste studies there was a plethora of village studies that gave rise to concepts such as universalisation and parochialisation, referring to the interaction between rural and urban societies in India through the prevalence of the caste system. As shown by scholars such as McKim Marriott, M.N. Srinivas, Robert Redfield, S.C. Dube and others, there was a continuity of social interaction through marriage and kinship as members of the same caste were spread in both cities and villages and were connected by the rules of caste endogamy. This has led to a free flow of cultural elements from the rural to the urban centers and even tribal elements have been incorporated into mainstream religion and cultures and vice-versa. Thus the icons of Jagannath and his siblings in the famous temple at Puri have strong resemblance to tribal deities while many tribal gods are only tribalised versions of higher Hindu gods like Shiva. Redfield's concepts of 'Great' and 'Little' tradition were also applied to the Indian scene with great success.

The preoccupation with caste and tribes led to the concept of Tribe-Caste continuum, and was developed by many eminent Indian scholars like Nirmal Kumar Bose and D.N. Majumdar. Majumdar had done fieldwork among many tribes of Eastern India and apart from showing how they change, he was also of the opinion that the category of tribe was a flexible and historical entity and not fixed. This observation has also been corroborated by many later scholars.

Check Your Progress

4. What were the important premises on which colonial anthropology was criticised by the feminist anthropologists?

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5. Name the Indian scholar who was a student of A.R. Radcliffe Brown.

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6. What was the contribution of Indian anthropologists to the study of caste?

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7. Who gave the concept of 'sacred complex'. Discuss and mention some other scholars who worked on the same concept.

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8. What kind of research was done on tribes by Indian scholars? What concepts emerged out of this research?

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3.3 MOVING INTO THE SIXTIES AND SEVENTIES

By the middle of the last century that is by the sixties and seventies, there was a great diversity in anthropological research across the globe. After the initial period of divergence, there was emergence of a global anthropological culture made possible by increased interaction between scholars as well as the movement by scholars from one academic institution to another. The differences between British and American anthropology reduced as new theories and approaches as well as new fields of research opened up.

The theories and perspectives that informed research in this period were Marxism that had considerable influence on French scholars such as Claude Meillasoux, Maurice Godelier and Emmanuel Terrey among others. Pierre Bordieu's theory of practice was widely appreciated and used by anthropologists. Although not a Marxist, the influence of Marxism on his conceptualisation of habitus, is clear. Fieldwork remained the forte of anthropologists at all times. The Marxist scholars looked for history and secondary sources for their constructions of social history, ethno-history and oral traditions which were widely used in addition to field observations. Marxism and Structuralism (Levi-Strauss and Edmund Leach) were still rooted in positivism. Levi-Strauss's Structuralism had binary opposition as a basic tool of analysis and he considered it an infallible character of the human mind. Levi-Strauss looked for the deep underlying structures of society at the level of human thought rather than in the overtly expressed behaviour. According to him all societies were in the last analysis systems of exchange that held people together.

The post-colonial critique challenged the existing euro-centrism of anthropological theory and many concepts that had a distinct euro-centrism were rejected or replaced. The dichotomous way of thinking was gradually being replaced by a fuzzier, less structured way of looking at social reality. Thus as we have already seen the scholars who studied Indian society in depth, soon realised that tribe and caste could not be seen as opposed or distinct from each other but had porous and often fuzzy boundaries. Also neither was bound and definable in any specific way and communities designated as tribes or castes occupy a wide range of possible organisations and ways of life.

Structuralism was followed by Post-structuralism and Phenomenology. Anthropological research became more reflexive and less structured and objective. It was realised that while dealing with other human beings it was not possible to be completely objective. The field situation was one of inter-subjectivity and the subjective self of the anthropologist was an integral part of the analysis.

The Feminist approach gained ground as it was demonstrated that women anthropologists brought in a different perspective in both data collection and analysis. Many established academic works were deconstructed, so to say, to show that their research was informed by a male bias. Feminist scholars also indicated the bias and subjectivity of the scientific method, showing that most scientific studies that claimed objectivity were in fact methodically substantiating existing power hierarchies, racial, sexual and others. Prominent among such scholars are Donna Haraway and Sandra Harding.

In India Feminism was introduced by Leela Dube along with scholars such as Pat Caplan, Maria Mies, Bina Majumdar and others who began to bring the anthropological focus on women as well as the construction of gender in Indian society. Scholars such as Leela Dube and before her Irawati Karve had shown the relationship of caste and gender as well the influence of Hindu texts on Indian women's roles and aspirations.

Phenomenological theories that although of some antiquity, found favour only towards the later part of the twentieth century once the obsession with positivism and objectivity was discarded in view of the accepted subjective nature of social sciences. The focus shifted from identifying structures of human behaviour and their classification to understanding the social reality through embodied experience. These researches proceeded on the premise that society is a construct and also experienced differently by actors in different historical and subjective position. Instead of power hierarchies the concept of power fields, where power is a diffuse and flexible and can only be understood through engagement. Noted phenomenological works are those by De Certeau, Dsordas and others. In India this approach has been used to understand the situation of marginal groups like the Dalits, for example in the collection by Channa and Mencher (2013). It has also been used by anthropologists such as Margaret Trawick and Karin Kapadia. Kapadia's study of untouchable Tamil women also includes considerable factual data on women's contribution to agricultural labour. But the strength of her work is in recording the subjective narratives of marginal women in a comprehensive way that gives a deep insight into their lives. Some like Sharmila Rege have left it to the reader to understand from her recordings of narratives of Dalit women. The experiential research was extended to medical anthropology to formulate the concept of social suffering put forward and developed by Arthur Kleinmann and Veena Das. In the Indian context it was used to analyse the sufferings of the victims of the Bhopal gas tragedy.

Biographical and autobiographical research, the latter known as auto-ethnography is a development from the earlier works done on life-histories, made famous by Oscar Lewis's monumental work, *Pedro Martin- A Mexican Peasant and His Family* (1964). Ever since anthropologists emerged from the earlier 'native' communities auto-ethnographical research is gaining in popularity. A recent work by Indian origin anthropologist Anand Pandiyan (2014) can be cited as an example. Pandiyan merges his grandfather's life history into his own to give a three generational depth to the ethnography that merges biographical and autobiographical narratives.

With the expansion of the field of anthropological research the anthropological foray into urban and global studies must be mentioned. Urban studies had made a beginning in the fifties in the USA and later became popular all over the world. The sacred complex studies in Gaya and Kashi also involve urban areas. Sylvia Vatuk in the seventies did commendable research on urban kinship in India. R.S. Khare did work among the Lucknow Chamars and Owen Lynch among the Jatavs of Agra. Both used ethnographic methods to study a specific community and that too, a marginalised one, in a medium sized city. Not much work has been done in mega cities by anthropologists that field being monopolised by sociologists and urban geographers.

Check Your Progress

9. Discuss the contribution of Feminist scholars to Indian anthropology.

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10. Name some of the important works done in anthropology from a Phenomenological perspective.

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11. What do you understand by auto-ethnography? Give some examples.

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12. Do anthropologists do research in urban areas? What kind of methodology do they use?

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3.4 MOVING AHEAD

By the end of the twentieth century however anthropologists could no longer ignore the transformations in the world around them in terms of rapid migrations, the flow of capital and information around the globe and research began on globalisation and its many processes. As soon as the interest shifted to this field it was realised that the traditional ethnographic methods and concepts could no longer yield results. One was no longer dealing with a localised universe and a more or less bound population or community. The methodology then had to incorporate multiple sites and concepts such as landscapes emerged to supplement

or replace area or region. This is known as multi-sited research. Space was seen as active and alive and not merely as a backdrop to action. Research was directed towards what is known as multi-sited ethnography that could keep count of people's movements through time and space. An example of such research is Pandian's work that traces his family through three countries, Burma (Myanmar), India and USA.

Research on globalisation also revealed that whatever happens at the local level, for example the rise of female work force in Bangladesh is affected by global forces. This connection and interchange between the global and the local has become the focus of research in all parts of the world as it is becoming more and more difficult to disengage a particular field from the wide network of global forces, economic, political and cultural within which it is set

Check Your Progress

13. Discuss the emergent trends in anthropological research in the 21st century.

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3.5 DIVERSIFICATION OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Anthropology as a discipline has diversified into many sub-branches as the interests of the scholars was extended to many fields. In the early phase of the discipline there was interest in the fields of psychology, medical anthropology and environment. An interest in human beings naturally supported an interest in the workings of the human mind as evinced in Franz Boas' book *The Mind of the Primitive Man* (1911) and the development of the Culture and Personality school by his students. Later the branch of psychological anthropology developed as a fully developed field of anthropology. Medical anthropology had its roots in the study of indigenous healers and rituals of healing like Clyde Kluckhohn's work about witchcraft among the Navajo Indians. Although the branch of psychological anthropology did not develop too far in India, medical anthropology has become a major area of research. Medical anthropology drew inspiration from the early works of scholars such as P.O. Bodding whose work on Santal medicine done in the late nineteenth century is now considered as a classic. Medical anthropologists began with studying indigenous medical practices such as shamanism, and while these still remain an important aspect of research they also study health seeking behaviour in many different locations and are engaged in the cognitive aspects of health and wellness. In India medical anthropologists work in areas of tribal health but also in more generalised fields like Malaria eradication programmes and multiple dimensions of HIV AIDS and disaster management.

Third world countries in the post-colonial era were deeply concerned about questions of development and national progress. Many anthropologists such as

Nirmal Kumar Bose and D.N. Majumdar were involved with such issues from the beginnings of the discipline in India. The post-modernist trends of critical anthropology have taken a back seat in India in favour of research to address urgent social and economic issues. In this respect a large amount of research has been directed towards dealing with problems related to development. In fact development anthropology forms an essential part of most anthropology syllabus.

However there are two trends in doing research in development anthropology in India. One kind treats the development programs as compulsory (and also essential) and then directs research towards the best form of implementation of these programs. These may involve those dealing with health issues like immunisation, malaria eradication, family welfare, violence against women and so on. The other kind of research is more critical in nature and interrogates the nature of development such as the building of dams and mining in forest areas and forcing tribals to adopt alien ways of life. A lot of research on these lines has been done by eminent anthropologists like Von-Furer Haimendorf, B.K. Roy Burman, Felix Padel, Walter Fernandes, B.D. Sharma and others. Most of these works have highlighted the deplorable state of tribals under the impact of development projects that blindly follow the classical western model that have long been rejected by the west.

In line with development related research, from the last part of the twentieth century and at present, considerable research interest has been directed towards environmental issues. Many of these that focus on environmental degradation due to so-called development projects overlap with the critical research done by those who try to show the negative aspects of conventional economic models of development that is only directed towards exploitation of resources and building up of capital gain.

Environmental research is also done in conjunction with medical anthropology to identify native uses of plants and herbs and also the philosophies of health that tie humans to the environment. A special branch of anthropology focused on indigenous knowledge systems has also emerged and is finding a key place in research. There is now a sea change in attitude towards tribal and indigenous societies and their systems of knowledge including that of non-western systems of medicine and indigenous modes of conservation and preservation of biodiversity. A category of people earlier considered as primitive and their knowledge as superstition has been replaced by respect and also a realisation that the tribals have better understanding of human environment relationships than do people belonging to industrial and capitalist societies. Such realisation has also been triggered by the environmental movements happening globally that wish to shift from a human centric world view to a nature centric one and to treat humans not as a privileged species but only among many. The reality that tribals and forest dwellers have lived for centuries in harmony with nature has refocused attention on their ways of life with a different lens. It is no longer felt that the tribals need to be developed but that others can learn from them as to how to live well and in a sustainable manner.

In view of the many pressing problems faced by a developing society like India, need has been felt to focus research on certain key areas where the ethnographic methods used by anthropologists are seen as yielding excellent research. In the next section we shall examine a few such emergent fields.

Check Your Progress

14. Describe some of the areas in which anthropologists are now doing research.

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15. What is understood by medical anthropological research and what is its relevance?

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16. What are the paradigm shifts in understanding of development from an anthropological perspective?

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3.6 APPLIED AND ACTION RESEARCH

Human rights are an area where anthropologists working most often with marginal and deprived communities have found themselves directed. As already mentioned the engagement of Indian anthropologists with the tribal populations led them to study of injustice and violence perpetuated on these people right from S.C. Roy onwards. Apart from throwing light on the structural conditions for the perpetration of exploitation and violence against those situated at the bottom or margins of society, many anthropologists also highlighted the subjective suffering of these people with a goal of disseminating information and also influencing policy making with respect to them. Although anthropology had begun as a discipline to help the colonial administrators rule over the so-called colonies, most anthropologists by virtue of their situation coeval with the people they studied, soon turned their sympathy to the ruled rather than the rulers. Since then anthropological research has served the cause of many indigenous communities all across the globe like the Native Americans, Maoris, Australian aborigines and African tribes.

Anthropologists have also taken up research with other marginalised communities such as racially marginalised, sexually and ethnically marginalised communities.

Other fields of applied research are extensions of medical anthropological research in areas of implementation of health programs and providing inputs for strategies of dealing with issues of poverty and sickness. Disaster management is another area in which anthropological research is making its contribution.

Anthropologists have provided methods such as participatory research for implementation and evolution of welfare programs. In this anthropology has emerged as a major discipline to provide support to work on displacement, rehabilitation and doing all kinds of demographic research.

Some fresh areas of anthropological inputs are in management and public sector enterprises. They help generate policy making and through their research also act as critics of existing policies.

Genetic and Forensic research conducted by biological anthropologists helps criminal investigations and legal processes.

Anthropological research is guided by its first principle of putting humanity first but in the contemporary world they are also showing concern for environment and the global community of all the species. Anthropologists have deconstructed and situated the concepts such as welfare, development and human happiness in a context away from the narrow materialistic and instrumentalist definition given by the classical economists. In this sense anthropological research is guided by the principles of equity, justice and sustainability of this planet.

Check Your Progress

17. Describe some of the applications of anthropological research.

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3.7 SUMMARY

This unit provides a detailed description of how anthropological research has passed through different stages of development. It kept growing with the changing scenarios of societies and communities studied along with scholarly insight on conducting anthropological research. The unit helps the learner gather that as the subject grew so did the ways of researching people progressed. Anthropological research has had scholars from working for the colonisers and their governments, to studying villages to broadening their horizons by including more than one site in their enquiry to applying their knowledge to bring about change in society. Research and ways of doing it is an ever evolving process and the aim of this lesson is the assist learners to identify how anthropological investigation has been and can be used divergently in varied situations to scoop out the best possible results.

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3.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. See section 3.1
2. The major directions of anthropological research during this period were evolutionism and diffusionism.
3. Refer to last paragraph of section 3.1
4. Refer to the 1st paragraph of section 3.2
5. M. N. Srinivas
6. Refer to the 2nd paragraph of section 3.2
7. Refer to the 2nd paragraph of section 3.2
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9. Refer to the 6th paragraph of section 3.3
10. Refer to the 7th paragraph of section 3.3
11. Refer to the 8th paragraph of section 3.3
12. Refer to the 9th paragraph of section 3.3
13. See section 3.4
14. See section 3.5
15. Refer to the 1st paragraph of section 3.5
16. Refer to 2nd, 3rd and 4th paragraph of section 3.5
17. See section 3.6