SEMESTER-II

M.PHIL, ANTHROPOLOGY

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TOPIC : FIELDWORK TRADITION IN ANTHROPOLOGY[7.1]

TEACHER:DR.SUMAHAN BANDYOPADHYAY

Fieldwork is an essential undertaking in anthropological research. It is considered to be the central activity in anthropology. The word fieldwork however is used in a variety of meanings among a cross-section of disciplinary practitioners. For the sociologists it is a kind of field survey. For other subjects like folklore or history, it is sometimes equated with field trip or visit for the collection of data from the context. For anthropologists, however, fieldwork has been a practice which was being performed with much methodological rigour from the beginning. It was mainly characterized by participant observation. Though before the more formal instituting of the participant method, the anthropologists used to go to the people in distant places and collected first-hand data from them and published on them. The field-based activities can also be referred to as fieldwork. Now the other disciplines are also borrowing the ethnographic fieldwork methods from anthropology in a more rigorous way.

In simple words, fieldwork is the collection of data from its naturally occurring context. Fieldwork is going away from home to stay among a group of people, that is generally different from that of the fieldworker’s ( or ‘Other’ ) for considerable period of time and living among them, observing and participating in their way of life as if the fieldworker is immersed in it, speaking their language and collecting data in this context.

**The ‘Field’**

The word ‘field’ bears a specific meaning. What is ‘field’? In simple understanding the field is a locale/space that is not home, some place which is away from home, at least in metaphorical sense of the term. Marc Auge talks about the ‘non-place’ character of anthropological field-setting. Traditionally speaking, the anthropological field-places were located in distant corners of the world. These fields were usually inhabited by the exotic peoples having a very different way of life, customs and beliefs. They were the ideal form of anthropologically held ‘other’ peoples. We can well remind how Malinowski portrayed such a field-setting in his celebrated book Argonauts of the Western Pacific(1922):

Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight. Since you take up your abode in the compound of some neighbouring white man, trader or missionary, you have nothing to do, but to start at once on your ethnographic work. Imagine further that you are a beginner, without previous experience, with nothing to guide you and no one to help you. For the white man is temporarily absent, or else unable or unwilling to waste any of his time on you. This exactly describes my first initiation into field work on the south coast of New Guinea.”(Malinowski, 1922, p. 4)

Malinowski did his fieldwork in Trobriand Islands in New Guinea. Before him, we know that W.H.R. Rivers conducted study among the Todas of Nilgiri hills in India, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown spent two years in Andaman Islands. Even long after Malinowski, anthropologists continued to do fieldwork in distant places. Evans-Pritchard’s studies on the Nuer of Sudan, Turner’s on the Ndembu of Zambia are only a few examples.

Denise Nuttall was an apprentice under the table maestro Ustad Alla Rakha and then under Ustad Zakir Hussain during her anthropological study of the Asian diaspora, indigenous knowledge system and Guru-Shishya parampara in India discovered the ‘field’ in a different way. She writes:

“As a tabla apprentice I came to realize that the anthropological field is not “out there,” connectedto a piece of land or a bounded geographical site. In an anthropology of apprenticeship, the body becomes the field site.”

(Nuttall: 324::2006)

Therefore, the anthropological experiences are the fundamental guides that fix the site for ‘field’.

**Defining Fieldwork**

Fieldwork is an essential undertaking in anthropology. For each and every student who has to go through the formal anthropological course, must get a practical training in fieldwork. In Indian universities and colleges, a fieldwork stretching from ten days to one month constitutes a part and parcel of the curriculum. More important is that the study of anthropology cannot be completed without undertaking fieldwork. The primary means to collect data for anthropological research is fieldwork. One goes to field, conducts fieldwork, then writes ethnographic report based on the data collected in the field. This ethnographic study may be published in the form of anthropological monograph and would constitute the basic reading for the disciplines. The theories may be built upon the date collected from the field when it is analysed. The researcher conducts fieldwork also to test some hypotheses with the primary data. The anthropological text books and references are written with the information gained and concepts formed through cross-cultural studies. Therefore, fieldwork is of primary importance in anthropology. Eriksen(2010) remarks that anthropology distinguishes from other social sciences because of the primary importance anthropology places upon fieldwork which serves as the source of new data on the society and culture. Fieldwork has been defined by various scholars. According to Berger( 1993:174), fieldwork is -

‘One of the most enduring, perhaps the most enduring, metaphors, or "keywords" ...in modem anthropology is "fieldwork" ... "fieldwork" is- it goes without saying, and thus must be said - the *sine qua non* of modern anthropology, the ritual initiation experience in the discipline.’

Berger(1993) considers fieldwork as the *sine qua non* of anthropology , which means it is an essential undertaking, and absolutely necessary for anthropology. Moreover, it is a particular stage in anthropological life cycle the effect of which is enduring through the career of an anthropologist.

Keesing and Strathern (1998:7) state that ‘t(T)he tradition of fieldwork, and a conceptual repertoire derived from deep immersion in local ways of life, has been the source of anthropology's strength.’

This deep immersion in local life is also the fieldwork method of participant observation.

Hortense Powdermaker, a noted American Anthropologist defines fieldwork in following words:

‘Fieldwork is the study of people and of their culture in their natural habitat. Anthropological fieldwork has been characterized by the prolonged residence of the investigator, his participation in and observation of the society, and his attempt to understand the inside view of the native peoples and to achieve the holistic view of a social scientist….’.( Powdermaker, 1969:418)

A Humanities –Scientific continuum is postulated in fieldwork(Table-1).

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Humanities** | **Science** |
| Art form | Scientific method |
| Qualitative | Quantitative |
| Emic | Etic |
| Subjective | Objective |
| Post modernism | Positivism/ Empiricism |

Table-1: Humanities –Scientific continuum in fieldwork.

Traditionally speaking, fieldwork has been a positivistic exercise. The early scholars in anthropology were searching for a scientific methodology for the emerging discipline. The growing scienticism was providing a justification for the knowledge. The accordingly the anthropologists were trying to formulate some universal laws of social and cultural change. The methodology of fieldwork was formulated in a way so that it could muster data objectively. The fieldworker is an observer of life in its natural context. He or she would record it and describe in a third person account.

**Features of Fieldwork**

1. Fieldwork is characterized by three important features – i. It is empirical.

ii. It is based on direct observation.

iii. The fieldwork is traditionally Positivistic in nature.

2. In fieldwork, one has to stay in a place different from ‘home’ for considerable time.

3. Anthropological fieldwork undertakes participant observation.

4. It is observing life at the naturally occurring context.

5. It encourages speaking the language of the people among whom the study is being done. Anthropology in fieldwork is something as ‘Going native’.

**‘Pre-History’ of Fieldwork Tradition**

The fieldwork tradition can be divided into a number of phases. Before the actual beginning of fieldwork in technical sense, there were a number of exercises that the predated the some of the activities undertaken in today’s fieldwork. This can be called the *‘*Pre-history of ethnographic fieldwork’ which constitutes the following:

The travel narrative of Greek scholar Herodotus ( 484 B.C.E -425 B.C.E. ). Herodotus’ *Histories*  written in 440 B.C.E. , it described the wars, kingdoms, the life of people and their beliefs in Greece and other parts of the world. While talking about the Egyptians, he stated that these people believed themselves to be the most ancient stock of mankind. He mentioned about the invention of the year by the Egyptians who divided the year into twelve months of thirty days. There are various other descriptions about the customs and manners of the people living in Egypt. Thus the idea of the ‘others’ was quite manifest in his account. He also attempted to provide explanations of the phenomena he described.

Strabo who lived in 1st century AD gave excellent account of the people and places of the ancient world known from empirical data. His *Geographica* was a wonderful document of his travel across many parts of the world. He mentioned that there were many tribes who lived in Greece. Of them, Ionic and Doric were important. Marco Polo who belonged to 13th -14th Century A.D. Italy was a marvelous traveler and merchant. He wrote about the great eastern civilizations of India, China and Japan with the first hand knowledge. His account published as *The Travels of Marco Polo* provided accurate account on the nature of currencies, salt trade, Chinese court etc. He even mentioned about Andaman and Nicobar islands. Ibn Khaldun’s ( 14th Century) *Kitab al Ibar* contains discussions for many disciplines including history, politics and sociology. His idea *asabiyyah* is equated with social cohesion or tribalism.

The Renaissance ideas played a great role in encouraging studies of other societies. The idea of ‘Noble Savage’ was an inspirational point. The philosophical discourses that were developed in this period made a great influence on the intellectual life. We may mention Locke ‘s Empiricism, Hegel’s concept of object, Kantian and Cartesian theories of knowledge.

The Enlightenment was another major source of inspiration. The ideals propagated by the enlightenment scholars exerted influence on taking up studies based on empirical observation . Comte’s Positivism was very influential in this regard. Progress and Social Evolution were two major areas of discussions by the scholars.

Colonial Expansion no doubt provided an opportunity to come in direct contact with the people of far off places. Moreover, the account generated by fieldwork could be of use to the colonial rulers.

So, the above background played a crucial role in the emergence of fieldwork as a definite methodological exercise in anthropology.

**Beginning of Fieldwork : Pre –Malinowskian Phase**

The German concepts of Volkskunde, Volkerkunde, ethnologie which indicated the concept of people and their indigenous culture emerged to present a delimited locale for fieldwork undertaking.

In Britain emerged the concepts of Ethnography, ethnology, Social Anthropology agreed upon – at the beginning 1900s.

There were a number of Expeditions during this time. We may characterize this phase as the ‘era of expedition’. The expeditions included:

* A. L. Schlozer – 1760s – 1st Ethnographic method: The Kamchatka Expedition (Mid 1700s)
* Francois Peron – 1800-04 – French Atlantic and Indian Ocean Expedition
* Henry Schoolcraft – 1822-1840 – Chippewa American Expedition
* L.H. Morgan – Iroquois 1840s -1850s.
* Franz Boas – 13 field trips at 40 different places @2 months
* Cambridge Expedition – Torres Traits – 1898-9: Haddon, Rivers, Seligman.
* 1901- Rivers: Toda
* 1904 – Seligman : Melanesia
* 1906- Radcliffe-Brown: Andaman
* 1907- Rivers: Melanesia
* 1907- Seligman: Vedda

There was a ‘Professional demand’ to undertake intensive fieldwork.

Science- Natural Science model was a common consideration in this regard. Franz Boas made some attempts to study the North American tribes in the field.

*Boasian Legacy*

Boas conducted his field investigations in early 1880s among the Eskimos.

“Boas' expedition to the Arctic, as planned, was essentially geographical. He wished to perfect the mapping of the region, and the eventual ethnographic character of his research seems to have developed during the time he was there, as an intensification of an interest which has been ascribed by some to the influence of one of his teachers, Theobald Fischer, in encouraging an interest in cultural geography. Moreover, the question of the perception of the color of water by the Eskimo does not enter into any of the reports of his work published during the years 1884 to 1888, when the definitive monograph he wrote covering his studies appeared as one of the early volumes of the Bureau of American Ethnology. The question, indeed, was never raised at all by him, either as concerns the Eskimo or any of the other peoples he later studied.” Herskovits, 9-10[Ref.- *Franz Boas- The Science of Man in the Making* by M.J.Herskovits,1953]

His return to North America was without particular thought of such a move, for he came to embark on his second field trip, this time in the Pacific Northwest, among the Bella Coola Indians. The field work was carried on during 1886.

At Clark, anthropology was a part of the department of psychology, headed by the President. Boas gave varied courses, laying the foundation for his later repertoire. In 1889-90 he offered "Anthropology of North America," "Methods of Anthropological Investigations," and, as the catalog put it, gave a "seminary on 'Shamanism.'

*Contribution of W.H.R. Rivers*

Rivers used the words ‘intensive work’ to distinguish ethnographic work from survey which he considered misleading.He wrote:

‘…a typical piece of intensive work is one which the worker lives for a year or more among a community of perhaps four or five hundred people and studies every details of their life and culture.’

He mentioned about ‘concrete details’ and use of the ‘vernacular language’.

Thus, all credits for inventing fieldwork should not go to Malinowski alone.

**Malinowski and Anthropological Fieldwork: Malinowskian Phase**

The publication of *Argonauts of The Western Pacific* (1922) by Bronislaw Malinowski was not theoretically much provocative, but also its value in the anthropological fieldwork was beyond any doubt. This book which the author subtitled as ‘An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea’ showed us how one should conduct the fieldwork in other culture. This laid the foundation of a methodology called participant observation. Malinowski carried out his ethnographic research for six years— 1914 to 1920—making three expeditions to the field for his work, and devoted the intervals between expeditions to the working out of the materials and to the study of special literature. However, the particular study on the Trobriand islanders was based on his fieldwork from 1914 to 1918. Malinowski states that the ethnographic work should bear the following goal:

“One of the first conditions of acceptable Ethnographic work certainly is that it should deal with the totality of all social, cultural and psychological aspects of the community, for they are so interwoven that not one can be understood without taking into consideration all the others.” (Malinowski 1922:xii)

Malinowski was also curious about what created the ‘ethnographer’s magic’. His understanding of this magic is also a guiding principle of Malinowskian approach to fieldwork. Let me quote from the text in which he expressed his view on this:

“As usual, success can only be obtained by a patient and systematic application of a number of rules of common sense and well-known scientific principles, and not by the discovery of any marvellous short-cut leading to the desired results without effort or trouble. The principles of method can be grouped under three main headings; first of all, naturally, the student must possess real scientific aims, and know the values and criteria of modern ethnography. Secondly, he ought to put himself in good conditions of work, that is, in the main, to live without other white men, right among the natives. Finally, he has to apply a number of special methods of collecting, manipulating and fixing his evidence.” (Malinowski,5:1922)

Of these three principles, he held the second one as most elementary.

He has elaborated the above principles one by one. He said that proper condition for fieldwork is of fundamental importance. The fieldwork must cut off all contacts with the white men and would live right among the natives in their village. He would remain as closer as possible in contact with the natives. It is the ideal situation which provides him with the opportunity to look at the life of the people around him in their daily chores and asking them questions at times on their customs, folklore etc. It may sometimes instill loneliness, however, his suggestion was to go for a walk and then to return to work to find some new interesting thing. Malinowski narrated his own stay at the village Omarakana in Trobriand Islands. He started to take part in the daily life of the villagers, in their festive events and to sit with them for a gossip. Every morning, he used to wake up for a morning walk along the village path. During this morning walk, he experienced how the villagers were preparing for their daily activities, their cooking, toilets, quarrel and other family scenes which might appear trivial to the common people, but for anthropologist it was very significant experience. Malinowski gave rationale why he used to do this. He reasoned that his regular presence in the village would fail to raise any curiosity among the villagers who ceased to get alarmed or self-conscious about his presence. In this way, he would be familiarized and become a part and parcel of the life of the people in the village. In this situation, the researcher could get the ideal opportunity to see the life in its naturally occurring context.

Malinowski suggested as the first and basic ideal of ethnographic fieldwork is to give a clear and firm outline of the social constitution and to disentangle the laws and regularities of the cultural phenomena from all irrelevant cases. This ideal sounds much like a scientific goal since the objective remains the finding out of laws. He further states that the bare skeleton of tribal life has to be ascertained first. However, the ethnographer would take into account each and every aspect of tribal life. He or she will not bypass the funny one for the common cases, but take the general and peculiar simultaneously. Malinowski states: “At the same time, the whole area of tribal culture in all its aspects has to be gone over in research. The consistency, the law and order which obtain within each aspect make also for joining them into one coherent whole.”(Ibid, P.9)

Burgess writes that ‘…it is Malinowski who is usually credited with being the originator of intensive anthropological field research…’(p.4).

On the contribution of Malinowski, Urry (1972) made the following remark:

“Malinowski’s contribution was not only to make clearer the type of information to be collected, but more importantly, he had differentiated between the type of material on the one hand and the methods for their collection on the other. It is this clear differentiation of the modes of collection and the various forms of ‘fact’ that made Malinowski’s contribution to field methods so original.” (Urry, 1972, p. 53)

In a nutshell, we can characterize Malinowskian fieldwork in following words:

* Malinowski is renowned for identifying what he termed "the proper conditions“ or "secrets" of effective ethnographic fieldwork.
* He advocated living among the people under study and remaining far from Westerners.
* He emphasized the need for clear scientific objectives, a thorough methodology to obtain results,
* and the use of special data-gathering methods.
* Finally, he stressed that a fieldworker should stick his nose into all ongoing affairs, even at the risk of offending local etiquette, to discover
* how the people thought behaved, and saw the world.
* Malinowski hoped thus to "grasp the native's point of view" as complementary to the more objective observer's perspective (Malinowski 1922:25).

**Influence of the Chicago School: Late Malinowskian phase**

The Chicago School was basically a movement and approach to research developed mainly during the early twentieth century. The name Chicago School was given because of its main centre of origin was the University of Chicago. The Department of Sociology of this university headed the movement. The formative years of the school was between 1920-1930s, though Robert Park, the pioneer of the school and a Professor in the Department of Sociology in the University of Chicago drafted a programme outline for research in 1916(Burgess,). As a methodological movement, its focus was on observation. It gave emphasis on the study of the city or urban culture. Following the instructions of Robert Park, one of the pioneering figure of Chicago School, the prime focus was stated :

“But one thing more is needful; first-hand observation. Go and sit in the lounge of the luxury hotels and on the doorsteps of the flophouses; sit on the Gold Coast settees and on the slum shakedowns; sit in Orchestra Hall and in the Star and Garter Burlesk. In short, gentlemen, go get the seat of your pants dirty in real research.” (McKinney, 1966, p. 71; emphasis in original) Cf Burgess,p.10

The members of the Chicago School included, apart from Robert Park, Nels Anderson, Cressey, Burgess, Shaw, Thrasher. Some of the important works published by the members of this school were *The Hobo* (1923) by Anderson, *The Gang* (1927) by Thrasher, *The Ghetto* (1928) by Wirth, *The Gold Coast and the Slum* (1929) by Zorbaugh and *The Jack Roller* (1930) by Shaw. *The Jack Roller* narrates the story of Stanley, a child in conflict with law. The text was based on observation, unstructured interview and life-history method. The story of Stanley was presented in an autobiographical style. It reveals how a boy like Stanley sees his world, how does he interprets his role and action, what is his surrounding milieu and culture.

The Chicago school emphasized the study of urban set up, the city and its culture. The urban sociology has its deep linkage with this study. Besides, the school was interested in the urban ecology as well. The methodology of school was characterized by a combination of journalistic and anthropological approaches. Park categorically mentioned the use of anthropological or ethnographic methods in the collection of data. Its main methods rest upon observation and unstructured interview. However, members of Chicago school also employed Life-History method, survey techniques and used quantitative data as well. It has always laid emphasis on fieldwork and collection of first-hand data.

The Chicago School’s emphasis on observation and insistence on anthropological method might have some influence in the establishment of the merit of fieldwork. We notice that a number of anthropologists were taking up studies in the line shown by the Chicago school. The forerunner among them was obviously Robert Redfield. In the development of Urban Anthropology, Chicago School undoubtedly contributed a lot.

Douglas was critical about the Chicago School. His point of criticism was that Chicago school admitted low level of analysis. Another objection was that the over emphasis on the ‘little community’ was detrimental to the understanding of complexity and networks that an urban set up contains.

**Anthropology’s Coming back to Home: Beginning of Post Malinowskian phase**

Post Malinowskian period witnessed certain phenomena which changed the history of the world.

Firstly, It was the Post Second World War period. The power structure was highly changed by this war.

Secondly, De-colonialisation started. New nations which were earlier parts of the colonial empire became independent.

It coincided with Anthropology’s coming back home. By this it was meant that the anthropologists started to concentrate on the studies of their own community and the problems of complex urban societies.

There was a replacement of ‘other’ in colony by the own people. It led to the

creation of ‘New Other.

This period was a Post-colonial milieu. Many new states emerged. Fading modernity was in sight, which paved the way for a new post modern regime.

**The Post modern Turn in Fieldwork: Post Malinowskian**

New forms of fieldwork is often been called ‘post-modern turn’ became a feature of this emerging tradition of fieldwork. There was a new epistemology of knowledge creation. The ‘truth’ value was questioned. This crisis on the veracity of knowledge impacted on the fieldwork tradition. This was actually termed as Post-modern turn. However, we may add some other features to this turning event-

Firstly, there was a ‘Literary Turn’ in the presentation of fieldwork account.

Secondly, with the questioning of epistemological issues the ‘Philosophical Turn’ became manifest.

Thirdly, new theoretical and methodological exercises were coming up. It included

i.Grounded theory – Spradley (1980) said that the ethnography offers an excellent scope for grounded theory. It builds up theory from the grounded study in the field through an inductive reasoning. Peter Wilson(2012) studied the English primary schools from this theoretical perspective.

ii.Phenomenology – It is the study of phenomena as they appear in consciousness. Anthropologists have concentrated on a number of topics ranging from medical domains to the understanding of body and politics. Cohen’s(1998) *No Ageing in India* is a good example of this kind of studies.

iii.Hermeneutics – Hermeneutics relates to the methods of interpretation. The hermeneutical approach can be discerned in anthropology in some studies that dates before postmodern period. However, this methodological trope got entrenched in anthropology much through the intermediary of Clifford Geertz. Wicker (1997) has shown the hermeneutics in fieldwork tradition and related it to applied anthropology.

iv.Ethnomethodology – Ethno-methodological approach is well used in the study of life-world. The phenomenological approach has close link with it. Ethno-methodology employs critical way to know the way people make sense of the everyday world. It has been applied as method in the ethnographic study of the life world of the people.

A new form of writing characterized by *Writing Culture* (1986) came into being. This book was edited by James Clifford and George Marcus. On this new style of writing practice in ethnographic fieldwork they wrote:

“A subgenre of ethnographic writing emerged, the self-reflexive

"fieldwork account." Variously sophisticated and naive, confessional

and analytic, these accounts provide an important forum for the discussion

o f a wide range o f issues, epistemological, existential, and political.

T h e discourse of the cultural analyst can no longer be simply

that o f the "experienced" observer, describing and interpreting custom.

Ethnographic experience and the participant-observation ideal

are shown to be problematic. Different textual strategies are attempted.

For example, the first person singular (never banned from

ethnographies, which were always personal in stylized ways) is deployed

according to new conventions. With the "fieldwork account"

the rhetoric o f experienced objectivity yields to that o f the autobiography

and the ironic self-portrait. (See Beaujour 1980, Lejeune 1975.)

T h e ethnographer, a character in a fiction, is at center stage. He or

she can speak of previously "irrelevant" topics: violence and desire,

confusions, struggles and economic transactions with informants.

These matters (long discussed informally within the discipline) have

moved away from the margins o f ethnography, to be seen as constitutive,

inescapable (Honigman 1976).”

**Fieldwork and its Relation to Anthropological Theory**

In the following table, we can see predominating theory and related fieldwork practices in the anthropological studies.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Period** | **Theory** | **Fieldwork** |
| Pre –Anthropological (Pre 1700) | Theory of Knowledge  Universalism-Relativism | Travel  Observing the ‘other’ |
| Enlightenment | Positivism | Expedition |
| Early Anthropology  ( Pre- Malinowskian) | Evolutionism, Diffusionism,  Historical Particularism | Group Expedition, Field Trip, Survey, **‘Intensive work’** |
| Malinowskian | Functionalism, Structural Functionalism, Neo-Functionalism, Cultural Ecology, Structuralism | Participant Observation,  Solitary long fieldwork |
| Late Malinowskian | Interpretative anthropology  Semiotic and Symbolic | Deep play, thick description, Social drama |
| Post Malinowskian | Post-modernism, Reflexivity,  Post-structuralism, Post-  Colonialism | Auto-ethnography, Multi-sited ethnography, Team Ethnography |

It makes the idea clear that anthropological fieldwork was very much informed by the theoretical tradition of the period. For example, the participant observation provided the data that could be well integrated into the theoretical framework of functionalism. Positivism continued to influence fieldwork and production of anthropological knowledge well up to the Malinowskian period.

It must be kept in mind that the fieldwork tradition in anthropology is a continuous flow of research enterprise. A new current of thought or battery of theory did not always obliterate the earlier exercise. So, there was overlap as well in theory and methods.

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