**Class Note**

M.Sc. Anthropology II Semester CBCS 2020

Course code : C-**ANT204**

Course name : **Foundations of Anthropology**

Topic- Fieldwork and its Importance in Anthropology (10.7)

Sub –Topic: PROBLEMS OF FIELDWORK

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Fieldwork is an indispensible exercise in anthropology. In doing fieldwork an anthropologist has to unavoidably confront some problems. These problems are of two types – one, practical or physical problems; two , problems that are theoretical in nature.

The practical problems include the issues of physical setting to provisions of funding. The physical set up of the field may be unsuitable or difficult for habitation. It may be deep in the forest or somewhere on the top of hill where biting cold pierces the marrow. Apart from physical inconveniences, there is possibility of hostile attack on wrong perception about the investigator. The rapport establishment is often a matter of better chance. The political or social instability may create problem in conducting fieldwork. Permission to visit disturbed area cannot be procured. Therefore it can be said that fieldwork is always a dependent process. The investigator has to depend much on the funding agency. The funding agencies have their own priorities that may not always match the research interest of the fieldworker.

The problems pertaining to theoretical implication are of two main types –one is methodological and the other one is mainly epistemological in nature. The methodology of research tells about participant observation that entails a total immersion in the field. This a time taking process and due to some cultural constraints it is often very difficult to achieve. The problem of representation is another critique of fieldwork. The selection of informant is a crucial point in fieldwork. Sometimes he may be misguided or misinformed. The verifiability of data is no doubt another moot point of fieldwork.

The theoretical issues regarding the problems of field work has another dimension. It makes it difficult, if not impossible,for fieldworkers to regard the people with whom they are conductingresearch merely as one-dimensional research subjects. Hencethe discomfiture many anthropologists have with using terms such asinformant, respondent or research subject as textual references forpeople they have known as friends, neighbours, advisers, etc. Nonetheless,opting instead for the latter terms of reference may not resolvethe problem that however sincere and nuanced the attachmentthey express, ethnographic fieldworkers are still also exploiting thisintimacy as an investigative tool. Participant observation is thereforeoften uneasily perched on the precipice between the inherent instrumentalismof this as of any research enterprise and the more complexand rounded social associations afforded by this particular method.The tension between the personal and the professional aspects offieldwork has, however, extended both ways, equally raising concernabout the integrity of anthropologists’ claims of professionalism.Judith Okely is undoubtedly correct that anthropologists have triedto respond to pressures for scientific detachment (1992) as a markerof professionalism.

Another device for establishing distance has been more literal, involving a convention for choosing fieldwork sites that are ‘away’, preferably far away from the ethnographer’s usual place of residence and work. Gupta and Ferguson argue that this convention has resulted in a ‘hierarchy of purity of field sites’.

Judith Okely has been a long-standing critic of the exoticist bias in anthropological orthodoxies which artificially position ‘field’ versus ‘home’. She has argued strongly for the importance of an autobiographical reflexivity as an integral element of ethnographic fieldwork. Indeed, Okely has gone so far as to subject episodes of her own childhood experiences in an English boarding-school to a retrospective ethnographic analysis (1996). Yet she insists that the quintessence of what makes ethnographic fieldwork anthropological continues to be a commitment to a process of utter social immersion.