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Social Anthropology And Sociology

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IT is unfortunate that the term anthropology should immediately suggest to one bearded and myopic ancients who study apes, skulls, primitives, head hunters, witchcraft and human sacrifice. In non-European coountries the term is particularly odious, as the indigenous inhabitants—the term "native" is deeply resented—do not like being regarded as "primitives" (another unfortunate word). The more educated people in these countries have all kinds of suspicions against anthropologists—that they are the agents of imperialism, spies masquerading as scientists, people who dig up unsavoury customs like polyandry which are best not remembered even if they ever existed and so on. Names are an important matter, and social anthropologists have reason to feel that their subject has not been lucky in the choice of its name.

Anthropology is a blanket term covering a group of studies which have man as their centre of interest. Physical anthropology, which is a part of human biology, treats man as an animal, studies his evolution from the primates, the formation of the various races of mankind, their past and present distribution, and the relation, if any, of physical differences between the various races to mental and cultural differences. Ethnology studies the history of peoples by reference to race, distribution over the world, and language, technology and other features of culture. It is closely allied to prehistoric archæology, which is an attempt to reconstruct the history of mankind, especially in the prehistoric periods, with the aid of archæological evidence. Social anthropology is quite distinct from physical anthropology and ethnology. It is the comparative study of human societies. Ideally it includes all societies, primitive, civilized and historic. Actually, however, it has until recently confined itself to primitive societies. But in the last twenty years, and especially in the last ten years, it has made great progress in England, and social anthropologists are beginning to study non-primitive societies. This is not the writer's opinion only, but is vouched for by Mrs. B. L. Seligman in the sixth edition of the *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* (Kegan Paul London, 1951), an authoritative publication of the Royal Anthropological Institute. In the preface to

this book she writes, "Part II, Social Anthropology, deals mainly with the sociology of non-literate peoples, though the methods described are also suitable in general principle to studies in an advanced society. The advance in Social Anthropology has been so marked since the fifth edition of *Notes and Queries* in 1929 that it was found necessary to rearrange this part, expanding it and presenting in it some topics previously dealt with in the sections on Arts and Sciences and Nature Lore."

Anthropology in our country is mostly restricted to physical anthropology and ethnology—especially the former—and social anthropology is conspicuous by its absence. This is specially marked in the field-studies undertaken in our country. This lack of balance could have been made up if a few of the hundreds of scholarships given by our government after the recent war had been allotted to social anthropology. In England, where social anthropology has made enormous progress after the end of World War II, only two Indian students took their doctorates in social anthropology, and the third is studying for a first degree. And I do not think that there were more than three Indian students studying anthropology in the U. S. A. during the same period.

I will not attempt to give here a history of social anthropology.* I will instead start with Emile Durkheim (1858—1917) who, more than any other single person, has determined the modern orientation of social anthropology. Through his books, and through the journal, *L'Anne'e Sociologique*, which he founded, he exercised a dominating influence over the growth of the subject. B. Malinowski and Prof. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown were both deeply influenced by Durkheim and this was largely responsible for the spread of Durkheim's ideas outside France, as well as for relating them to field work. Prof. Radcliffe-Brown in particular, as the theoretician *par excellence* of British social anthropology in the last twenty years, while rejecting the crudities of Durkheim, developed a neo-Durkheimian point of view which has found widespread acceptance.

It is worth mentioning here that Durkheim and his colleagues included in their studies all societies, primitive, ancient and modern. Both aboriginal Australia as well as contemporary Europe were included

* See Chapters II, III & IV of Prof. E. E. Evans-Pritchard's *Social Anthropology* (Cohen & West, London, 1951), for a brief history of social anthropology in England and France.

in Durkheim's own purview. French sociologists, following Durkheim, refused to recognise any distinction between primitive and civilized societies in their studies.

In the last hundred years two rival concepts, "culture" and "society" have claimed the attention of anthropologists in the Western World. Tylor, Haddon, Seligman, Rivers, Elliot-Smith and Perry in England, Graebner, Ratzel, Pater Schmidt and Koppers among others in Germany, and F. Boas and Professors Kroeber and Lowie in America, may be said to have concentrated upon "culture". (Even now American anthropologists pay considerable attention to the concept of culture). Maine, McLennan, Herbert Spencer, Frazer, Malinowski (only in his earlier work though) and Prof. Radcliffe-Brown and L. H. Morgan in America may be considered as emphasizing "Society". The extraordinary influence of Boas among American anthropologists was responsible for the great attention paid to "culture" at the expense of "society". Even now there is a hiatus between anthropology and sociology in America, in spite of appearances to the contrary, and it is bridged only in the work of some sociologists like Professors Talcott Parsons, Lloyd Warner and the Lynds, and in some of the younger writers.

The fact whether an anthropologist emphasizes "culture" or "society" is not only a linguistic matter. It goes much deeper. Emphasis on "culture" reveals historical or ethnological interests whereas emphasis on "society" reveals sociological interests. (I am not saying that the one is superior to the other, or that the one can do without the other, I am only recording the existing differences.) To give an example of the implications of this difference: I once heard an American anthropologist say in a lecture that one could sometimes "reconstruct a whole culture from a drunken old woman of ninety." And this was a common attitude among field-workers all over the world before the advent of Malinowski. Pre-Malinowskian anthropologists used to rely on a few old informants who were able to dictate notes at length about customs and usages no longer prevalent. No social anthropologist in England today would regard anything less than 16 to 18 months with a strange people as at all adequate. Reliance on select informants who can be trusted to fill one's notebooks, is no longer approved. The emphasis is on direct observation of social relations. An informant might mention a norm of conduct which is more honoured in the breach than in the observance. To the anthropologist interested only in the reconstruction of the culture the mere existence of the norm is enough, whereas to one interested in

making significant general statements about social relations between persons, the verbal respect to the norm and the violation of the norm in actual behaviour are both important.

A modern social anthropologist regards a society as a system or unity the various parts of which are related to each other. He considers that any single aspect of society, abstracted from its matrix of sociological reality, is unintelligible except in relation to the other aspects. And even when he is writing only about a single aspect of a society like religion or law or morals he brings to bear on his study his knowledge of the total society. The importance of such a perspective cannot be over-emphasised, and it can only be achieved by the intensive study, over a long period of time, of a single small society. If I were asked to say what I regard as the most important contribution of social anthropology to the social sciences in general, I would without hesitation reply that it is the insistence on the necessity of an anthropologist making an intensive study of all the aspects of a selected society. Such a study deeply affects one's entire approach to sociology, as is evident in everything a social anthropologist writes. It is here that the social anthropologist scores heavily over his sociologist colleague who has studied only a small fragment of a vast and enormously complex society like our modern Industrial societies.

I hope I will not be regarded as placing a "Mystical" value on the anthropologist conducting intensive field-work. Durkheim and Mauss, two of the great names in social anthropology, did not do any field-work. And I can claim friendship with one for whose comparative sociological studies I have the utmost respect who has not made a field-study. But, by and large, it is safe to assume that experience of intensive field-work is an absolutely essential qualification for a social anthropologist. Most modern sociological contributions would have gained greatly in value if the sociologist, like Prof. Lloyd Warner of Chicago, had had a prior experience of field-work in a small society.

A modern social anthropologist is expected to have studied intensively at least two societies, preferably in two distinct areas. It has been found that only one piece of field-work leads to a certain lopsidedness in the anthropologist. He tends to regard, even against his best intentions, "his" particular society as Society in general. Only another study, preferably in a different area, will teach him to regard every society as but one instance of the great variety that is found in human societies all

over the world. Forms occurring in a single society will then be not invested with universal significance. This view stems directly from and leads to an insistence on comparison. Without comparison, social anthropology ceases to be anything more than ethnography, though the description might reach a high level of abstraction. It may be mentioned here that, nowadays, even when a social anthropologist makes a single study, he carries into it his knowledge of other societies derived from his reading of the works of other social anthropologists. Comparison might be said to be implicit in such a case.

The intensive, first-hand study of two small communities is not easy. Quite apart from the money required to make the two studies—the training of a social anthropologist is a very expensive matter nowadays, and consequently, there is a need to select one's students with great care—the time required to write up their results will be anywhere between 15—20 years. A famous French social anthropologist is reputed to have remarked "one year's field work, ten year's writing up." I can only add that he has to be quite a hard-working man indeed to be able to finish it in that time, especially if he has, as he usually does, other academic duties, like teaching and guiding research students, as well. Malinowski himself, in spite of his great industry, had not completed writing up all his field notes when he died in 1942, twenty-four years after his return from the Trobriand Islands. Of course he had spent four years, an unusually long period, among his people. Prof. Evans-Pritchard writes, "Although he (Malinowski) collected a vast amount of material about the Trobriand Islanders and published several volumes on them before his death, he gave only a partial account of this people, and we are still in the dark about some of their most important activities, particularly about their political organization and their kinship system." *

It is the insistence on the experience of intensive field-work that has chiefly contributed to making social anthropology a respected and respectable academic discipline. Is is not without reason that in British Universities, where academic standards are of a uniformly high level, social anthropology is an established and expanding subject, whereas, barring London, no English University has a chair in sociology. The distinguished occupants of the Martin White Professorship of Sociology in London, formerly Westermarck and Hobhouse, and at present, Prof. Ginsberg, have all been not only deeply read in social anthropology but

* Op. cit., p. 93.

themselves conducted investigations which are social-anthropological in character. In the establishment of social anthropology as a subject of scholarship in the ancient Universities of Great Britain, and the difficulty which sociology is experiencing to obtain a foothold there is a moral for our country.

The charge is often hurled at social anthropologists that they are completely preoccupied with primitive societies, and that they have no time for anyone who wears a loin cloth. This is unjust. In recent years social anthropologists have extended their field to include people like, for instance, the Arabs of Cyrenaica, who, though a nomadic tribe, speak a language which has a great literature, and profess a religion which is spread over great areas in Europe, Africa and Asia. Another important step has been the undertaking of studies of peasant communities in different parts of the world, Ireland, Spain, Canada, Mexico, Japan and China. In our own country studies of Indian villages in four different linguistic areas are being made at present by social anthropologists. In England and America students intending to make studies of urban problems are beginning to obtain a training in social anthropology. Prof. Lloyd Warner of Chicago was the first to follow such a path and in recent years, he has been followed by a few others. This is a sound procedure and has everything to commend it. I hope we in India will come to look upon training in social anthropology as an essential preliminary to undertaking sociological studies—to some extent this is the practice in the School of Economics and Sociology in Bombay, where Prof. Ghurye, at one time a pupil of Rivers, Haddon and Hobhouse, holds the Chair of Sociology. Prof. Ghurye has also insisted on the need to conduct field studies, and the present writer obtained his experience of field-work as his student.

But it is true that at present social anthropologists are concentrating on the study of primitive societies, and there are reasons for it. First of all, primitive peoples are changing everywhere and in a few years there may not be any primitive peoples left for study. It is very desirable then that they should be studied here and now—*this does not mean that social anthropologists like people to be primitive but only that they like to take advantage of a great historical opportunity.* In comparative studies what is important is not the number of instances compared, but their diversity. Primitive societies differ greatly not only from civilized societies, but also from each other. The intensive study of them, while

the opportunity is still there, is absolutely essential for the progress of the discipline devoted ultimately to understanding the nature of human societies everywhere, in space as well as in time.

There are also certain other advantages with primitive societies. The fact that they are different from one's own stimulates curiosity. It is much more difficult to study one's own society than it is to study a strange and far-away one, though social anthropologists in China, India, England and America are beginning to study small pockets of their own societies. One is so deeply involved with the values of one's society that the study of a strange society becomes an essential preliminary to undertaking the study of one's own society. A certain detachment from the values of one's own society, and also from the values of the society one is studying is absolutely necessary. Here again the social anthropologist has a great advantage over the sociologist. I find it somewhat irritating to read American text-books of sociology as, for all their claim to be "scientists," American Sociologists implicitly but none the less deeply, believe in the values of contemporary America, like democracy, equality of the sexes, superiority of the elementary family to other types of family the benefits of industrialization and so on.

In spite of a belief in quantitative methods and "Scientific Objectivity," those who write text-books of Sociology in America are bogged by utter subjectivity. As a contrast I would refer the reader to any of the descriptive monographs of modern social anthropologists.

As modern industrial societies are vast and their complexity is enormous it is best that he who wishes to study them has initially an acquaintance with studies of simpler societies. A first-hand study of a primitive society would be desirable, but if it is not easy, he should at least have read a few monographs by social anthropologists. Primitive societies being small in size, it is possible for a single person to study them as wholes which is not possible in the case of urban societies.

To turn to 'sociology" for a moment. The subject, as it is taught and expounded, has at one end social philosophy, and at the other, social work, and neither of its neighbours exercises a healthy influence on it. Social philosophy, one cannot help saying, is a vague and woolly subject which consists of theorisings of philosophers who occasionally like to deck out their theories with facts which suit the theories—much like Hobbes, Rousseau and several others. Social work is a more prosperous academic

neighbour, and constitutes a greater danger to sociology, especially in a country like ours where there is at present a natural emphasis on social reconstruction. As social work is becoming very popular as a post-graduate subject in our universities, and as jobs are likely to be available for social workers, it is likely that some sociologists might be tempted to stress the closeness of the connection that exists between sociology and social work. I have nothing but the highest respect and admiration for the great social workers of our country like Mahâtma Gândhi, the late Thakker Bâpa, and Âchârya Bhâve', and I do not mind if social work becomes very popular as a subject in our universities, but I must say that it will be a disaster for sociology if it does not assert its autonomy from both social philosophy and social work. Any alliance on the basis of expediency will not only prevent the emergence of the proper kind of sociology but it will make popular a cheap variety of "applied sociology" which everyone with any respect for academic integrity and standards will keep away from.

It is necessary to point out here that sociology in America has been inextricably tied up with the social problems of that country. The presence of compact, unassimilated or partly-assimilated, immigrant groups in the midst of the earlier immigrants, the existence of members of different races like the American Indians, Negroes, Chinese and Japanese and the rapid growth of industrialization and its attendant problems have all determined the character of American sociology. The availability of funds for investigating social problems like juvenile delinquency, increase of divorces, and the existence of inter-racial tensions have prompted American sociologists to study these problems. It is difficult to resist the desire to do good especially when it helps to keep the proverbial wolf at a respectable distance from the doors of sociologists. But this has not been advantageous to the growth of "pure" or "fundamental"—I regret I cannot find more suitable terms—sociology which is devoted to the study of social institutions on a comparative basis which has as its aim the making of intellectually significant statements about the nature of human social relationships.

Two other tendencies present in American sociology need to be noted: One is the proliferation of surveys, polls, questionnaires and the like. I am as yet unaware how exactly sociology has profited by them, though they may have helped newspapers to forecast elections, and employers and the state to raise production.

Yet another tendency is to undertake surveys comprising large regions of the globe. For instance, the attempt to present a pattern of Indian culture after six month's travelling all over the country by bus, car, railway and plane might be an interesting diversion for some people, but it is fatal to sociology. A social anthropologist who, in addition to his general theoretical equipment, has made a prior study, from books of the area he is going to, and who has studied a single tribe or village for over a year, learning the local language, would be aghast at the ease with which facile generalizations are made about vast countries with a long recorded history and containing heterogeneous populations. That is not the way sociology is going to commend itself to scholars in other subjects.

It looks as though sociology is going to become a popular subject in our universities and it is extremely important that we should make clear what type of sociology we want to be taught here. To put it bluntly, I regard the uncritical acceptance and teaching of sociology as it is expounded in the numerous text-books available on the subject as a national intellectual disaster of the first magnitude.

How then should we teach the subject in our universities ? It would be a good idea if we could insist that students wishing to study "sociology" make a prior study of "social anthropology" for at least two years. This is very desirable for a number of reasons. It provides a cure to "ethno-centricism". Besides, it produces a certain charity and tolerance towards ways of life other than one's own. The study of societies as integrated wholes provides the correct perspective for studying small fragments of modern industrial societies. It is also more difficult to study one's own society than it is to study an alien society Finally, it is essential that students of sociology must develop an empirical outlook—a knowledge of social anthropology will teach them that

We could, of course, do away with the distinction between sociology and social anthropology and include them both under "comparative sociology." This would help to separate social anthropology from physical anthropology and ethnology. The union of social anthropology and sociology is desirable and will be to the advantage of sociology.

One last point; ours is a vast and ancient country wherein have met and mingled many races and cultures. We have still some very primitive groups with us. People professing different religions live here.

There is a great and continuous literary heritage in several languages. Our archaeologists, historians and Indologists are continually adding to our knowledge of the country's past. The sociology we should evolve must then include all the aspects of our society—it should include within itself the study of primitive groups, peasant communities, the various sects and cults, and aspects of our urban life. It should convince historians and Indologists that we have something to offer to them, something that will make their work even more fruitful and interesting.

Our sociology should be truly comparative. We should realize that even our vast and ancient society is only a part of the total field available for study. The sociologist aims ultimately at making general statements that embrace all societies.