Social Anthropology
And the Study of Rural and Urban Societies

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The last decade has seen a great increase in the money spent upon social research in India. Professor Srinivas argues that through abuse, of the methods of social anthropology and ignorance of their limitations, such money is often wasted. In this article he describes against "practical" and in favour the origins and methods of modern social anthropology, and puts the case of "pure" research.

I
During the last hundred years social anthropology has concentrated on the study of 'primitive' societies even though it has not entirely excluded non-primitive societies. Classical Greece and Rome, Ancient India, China, and Egypt have received the attention of such anthropologists as Morgan, Maine, Robertson-Smith, Frazer, Fustel de Coulanges, Mauss and Hubel. These men studied sociological problems, though in an evolutionary or historical setting. Sir Henry Maine, for instance, made a comparative study of the relation between law and religion, and the effect of codification on legal institutions in Ancient Greece, Rome, and India.

Field-Work
Social anthropology is as much characterized by the method which it pursues as by its subject-matter. The method is intensive field-work or 'participant observation' as some prefer to call it. Lewis H. Morgan was the first scholar to undertake a field-study of a primitive people: his account of the League of the Iroquois is a product of field-work done before 1851. Franz Boas undertook a field-trip to Baffin Land in 1883-4, and A C Haddon led the Cambridge Expedition to the Torres Straits in 1898.

The field-work tradition gradually became established in the subject, and nowadays, a social anthropologist needs to have done intensive field-work at least in one society if not in two. (In this respect social anthropology offers a contrast to other social sciences.) Insistence on field-work has had a profound effect on the character and growth of the subject. Firstly, the subject has its feet firmly planted on the ground; secondly, theoretical propositions must be referred to a body of ethnographic data, either the result of one's own or another's field-work. Theoretical conclusions, formulated by others are developed further by applying them to a body of intensive data collected by the anthropologist himself. For instance ideas regarding the relation between religion and society, first propounded by Durkheim when analysing the religious life of the Australian aborigines, were developed further by Radcliffe Brown in his work on the Andamanese Islanders. Purkheim himself was influenced by Robertson-Smith. Similarly, Evans-Pritchard's interpretation of Azande Witchcraft owes something to Levy-Bruhl's ideas on 'primitive mentality'.

Theoretical development has led to better field-work and vice versa. Over the last fifty years there has been a continuous effort to get deeper and newer kinds of data to answer the needs of developing theory. Now almost every one agrees that a few weeks or months with a people, working through interpreters and a few selected informants cannot provide a reliable or intimate view of the people studied. An anthropologist is expected to spend at least 12-18 months among the people he studies, to master their language, and to observe as much as he can. As Professor Barnes has said, "recent field workers tend to make much greater use of the people they study as actors than did their predecessors". (See "Social Anthropology in Theory and Practice" by J A Barnes in 'Arts, the Proceedings of the Sydney University Arts Association'. Vol I, 1968. pp 47-67).

British and American Anthropology
The British school of social anthropology now emphasizes not culture but society, social structure, and social relations, and this has had a profound effect on the Kind of data gathered. In the good old days an anthropologist obtained from one or a few informants the customs and rules in force among the people he was studying. Nowadays he obtains, in addition information regarding the extent to which the customs and rules are actually observed, and the penalties attached to their violation. He also tries to find out whether some customs and rules are obeyed more than others, and whether this is associated with other factors such as class, caste, religion, kinship, and age. Above all, he tries to observe in actual field situations the respect or the lack of it accorded to different customs and rules, the comments made by various people, and so on.

Most American anthropologists have an interest in culture and personality and this has resulted in their paying considerable attention to the process of child-rearing especially in the first few years of an infant's life. A great deal of data is nowadays recorded which would have gone unnoticed before. 'Culture and Personality' is now almost a distinct branch of anthropology.

Comparative Sociology
Another feature which has distinguished social anthropology from the beginning is its faith in the 'comparative method'. The great progress made by the subject in the last hundred years has led to a change in the very conception of comparative method. It is indeed a far cry from the 'comparative method' as practised by Maine and McLennon to Radcliffe-Brown's 'The Social Organisation of Australian Tribes,' and from Morgan's 'Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity in the Human Family' to The African Systems of Kinship and Marriage'. First, modern anthropologists, unlike their for-
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bears, are chary of undertaking comparative studies which include all societies, ancient, mediaeval and modern, and from every part of the world. The data at the disposal of modern anthropologists is immense, and one man, however industrious, cannot master more than a small portion of it. Modern anthropologists are—and can afford to be—far more critical of their sources than their forbears. (This does not however, apply to the Yale Cross-Cultural Survey, where, from what I have seen of it, no attempt is made at evaluating the sources.) Also, modern anthropologists tend to restrict comparisons to relatively homogeneous areas, and they prefer to undertake such comparisons in areas with which they have some first-hand experience. It is obvious that it is less difficult to compare societies or institutions within a broadly homogeneous area than those from entirely different culture-areas.

Some would argue that all understanding of another society is necessarily comparative, in as much as an anthropologist understands the society he is studying only by comparing and contrasting it with his own society, even though this comparison is never verbalised. When an anthropologist has made a field-study of a community he has two communities to fall back upon, the one into which he is born and the other which he has studied. Gradually, as his acquaintance, first or second-hand, with other societies increases, his approach becomes more truly comparative. Without this, he fails to have sufficient detachment from his own society, or from the one in which he has carried out his fieldwork.

Most people believe that the comparative method is effective, but a minority argue that comparisons undertaken with a view to arriving at general laws are bound to lead to frustration. This does not mean, however, that they regard comparison as useless. On the contrary, their contention is that while systematic comparison does increase the anthropologist's understanding of the institution or institutional complex in question, such understanding cannot be translated into general laws. They argue that the institutions of a society are so closely knit together that the abstraction of a single institution from its total matrix is bound to lead to distortion. Part of the significance, if not the id-entity, of an institution consists in the way it is integrated with the other institutions of the society of which it is a part. Thus two institutions, however similar they may appear, are not identical, since each forms a unique combination with the other institutions in the society of which it is a part. In the eyes of the less sophisticated practitioners, institutions tend to be seen very much as a mechanic sees the parts of a motor car.

Because the social anthropologist knows only too well that the institutions of a society are inter-related, even when he is studying only a single institution, he gathers information about all the other institutions. He records practically everything he sees and hears. Someone has described his method as "Grab-Air". It is no wonder that this method leads in the accumulation of a vast body of data, and a year's field-work usually means ten year's writing up. If an anthropologist undertakes two research-projects he will spend the major part of his working life writing up his notes. His notes become a burden on his conscience and he is unhappy whether he spends his time on or away from them. In the former case he neglects the works of his predecessors and colleagues: in the latter he fails in his duty to posterity. Some American scholars have found a solution by mimeographing and circulating their notes. This may be a necessary compromise, but it is not as good as when the field-worker writes a monograph. A man's notes can stimulate him to recalling other facts which he has not recorded, and there are many gaps which only he can fill. Others however brilliant, do not have the same field-experience, without which interpretation is seriously handicapped.

II
Civilized Societies

In the thirties, a few social anthropologists studied village communities in such "civilized" countries as China, Japan, Ireland and Canada. Professor Lloyd Warner made a study of a small town in Massachusetts. Social anthropologists consider that their Held of study embraces all societies, primitive, modern and historical. In ever part of the world. This is perhaps inevitable in a world in which "Primitive" peoples are fast ceasing to be primitives.

Studies of village communities which are a part of wider societies and which have historical records going back to remote antiquity, promise rich rewards. Scholarship with regard to these countries has until recently been dominated by antiquarians, philologists, archaeologists, historians, Classical scholars, Arabists, Sanskritists, and Sinologists. The world owes a great debt to their devoted labours. But their view of the particular country they studied and its culture is chiefly derived from books, sacred and secular, and from monuments and inscriptions. Even information about social institutions of the people has been culled from ambiguous hymns, fanciful myths, and the conflicting utterances of cloistered lawyers and commentators. In particular, a Arm chronology is not available for much of the literary material on ancient and mediaeval India. In the case of the legal works, it is not clear where the author hailed from, and what relation the laws he was advocating bore to the customs and laws actually observed by the people in towns and villages. Did the king try to enforce uniform laws throughout his kingdom? What was the relation between the king and the lawyers?

In India there has been a concentration of scholarly attention on the written literature and this has been responsible for the coming into existence of a 'book-view' of Indian society and culture. This view has gained the acceptance of educated Indians who see their culture through books. Naturally, this has distorted their perception of the field situation. This is clearly seen in the fact that educated Indians try to superimpose the simple varna-image of caste on the actual complexity of the jati-system of a region. This has led to interpreting caste as a simple and almost immutable hierarchy, which if most definitely is not. (See "Varna and Caste" in A R Wadia, Essays in Philosophy Presented in His Honour, Bangalore, 1954.) Following from this book-view, there is a widespread feeling among educated Indians that the customs of the people, especially of the lower castes, are not worth serious notice,
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**Contribution of Social Anthropology**

Field-studies in little communities have added a new and live dimension to the studies of countries with a long and recorded past. Their effects are already being felt. Thus Professor Gluckman argues from analysis of the feud among the Nuer and other tribal communities in Africa that the Anglo-Saxon Sib could not have functioned as a feuding group. (Custom and Conflict in Africa. Oxford, 1955. pp 21-23.) Pitt-River's People of the Sierra contains several stimulating suggestions about Spanish society, culture, and history, and his remarks on the different significance attached to anarchism and anti-clericalism by different sectors of Spanish society need to be followed up systematically.

In our own country, intensive studies of little communities using the techniques and concepts of modern social anthropology have already begun to yield useful tools for analysing the social life and culture of India as a whole. If I may refer to my own studies, the concept of Sanskritisation and the division of Hinduism into All-India, peninsular, regional, and local forms, which were developed in my study of Coorg religion and society, have been found useful in the analysis of other areas in India and of other, wider, problems. It is not unlikely that they may prove useful even in the analysis of historical data. In a country such as India the little community is a part not only of a big state but also of a 'great tradition', and analysis of the former will provide valuable insights into the latter, insight which perhaps cannot be secured in any other way. (See my 'Village Studies and their Significance', 'Eastern Anthropologist', VIII. Nos 3-4, March-August 1955. pp 215-228.)

The concept of the 'dominant caste' which again emerged from intensive field-work in a small community seems to be relevant in the analysis of problems at wider and higher levels. It may also help in understanding regional political history, powers-relations in modern India, and other similar problems.

The village studies have highlighted the importance of certain extant records which are indispensable for the analysis of rural social life, but which have so far failed to attract the attention of Indian historians and archivists. They include the official village and taluk records. Field-workers today urgently need a handbook describing the various records available in each region. Besides the official records, village and caste headmen in many parts of India have with them records relating to the settlement of disputes and other matters. These need to be collected and preserved and made available to research-workers. Yet another kind of documents lie with professional genealogists and bards. The field-anthropologist's study of the institutions of peasants make him sensible of the value of these documents. His field-work needs to be supplemented by the study of the available local records, official as well as non-official. The latter give depth and perspective to the field-study. There is no field-worker who has not felt that his analysis would have improved vastly if he had had a good local history at his disposal. On the other hand, field-work provides insights into local history.

**Urban Studies**

In India the urban field has until recently been more or less monopolised by economists. But in the last four or five years a few social anthropologists, foreign as well as Indian, have undertaken field-studies of towns and factories. Here is obviously a rich field for investigation by the intensive method of social anthropology. Next to nothing is known about the social background of industrial workers in different parts of India. To what extent do linguistic, territorial, caste and kin ties operate in a modern factory? What are the changes which caste undergoes in towns, and what kind of continuity, if any, obtains between it and caste in rural areas? Does the joint family 'disappear' or undergo modifications in towns? Can we pinpoint the differences between traditional towns, (e.g., an old capital of a Raja or a pilgrim-centre) and modern towns? Sometimes it is found that a factory is situated in a traditional town. Does this bring into existence any new patterns of social relationship, and if it does, what is their relation to the traditional patterns? How far are caste, kin, religious and other affiliations relevant in determining the settlement pattern of a town, in commercial enterprise, in the trade union and cooperative movement, and in politics and education? How far can it be assumed that the social forces which are operative in western towns are also operative in Indian towns? The ethnography of Indian urban life is conspicuous by its absence.

The main difficulty with intensive field-work is that it yields best results only when the community is sufficiently small to be investigated by a single man in the course of a year or two. It is obvious that this method will have to be modified or supplemented with others if it has to be extended to the study of big towns or large areas or to historical problems. There is at present an undesirable dichotomy between the study of small communities and the study of towns and macro-cosmic problems. The intensive method is employed in the former, and questionnaires, case studies and statistical techniques in the latter. Such a dichotomy is unhealthy, and if social anthropology is to be extended to the study of towns and of macro-cosmic problems, it cannot afford to rest content with the intensive method. On the other hand, the use of questionnaires etc. to the exclusion of the intensive method, will result in superficiality, if not in misinterpretation. The employment of different techniques in studying micro-cosmic and macro-cosmic problems has resulted in erecting an undesirable barrier in what is, after all, a single field of studies. The French sociologists led by Durkheim recognised this fact and Durkheim himself studied the religion of Australian tribesmen as well as suicide in Europe. Marcel Mauss studied gift-exchange in primitive, ancient, and modern societies.

**Teamwork**

Social anthropologists should welcome the current tendency to quantify data wherever necessary, and a knowledge of elementary statistical techniques should be regarded as part of an anthropologist's normal equipment. They should also realise that there are a vast range of problems where the intensive method is either not
The Last Phase

The commissioning of the new Rs. 70-million Blast Furnace in Jamshedpur in October marks the beginning of the end of the expansion programme started in December 1955 to double Tata Steel’s capacity to two million tons a year.

One of the largest in the world, the new Blast Furnace will produce 1,650 tons of molten iron per day. Completed earlier was the third Steel Melting Shop with its seven open hearth furnaces, which alone will produce 1.3 million tons of steel ingots a year. Also in operation now is the new Rs. 100-million Blooming Mill with a primary rolling capacity of two million tons.

Covering every phase of operation from the winning of ore to the rolling of finished steel, the expansion will be virtually completed by the end of 1958. The capital investment on expansion and annual replacements by Tata Steel over the five years 1955-60 is estimated at Rs. 1,330 million—more than one-fifth of the total outlay by organised industries in the private sector.

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ON TO TWO MILLION TONS
applicable at all or needs to be supplemented with other techniques. Teams, intra-disciplinary as well as inter-disciplinary, have to be employed in the study of some problems.

It is necessary, however, to stress that unless much careful thought goes into the planning of a project to be undertaken by a team and to the selection of personnel, teamwork is more or less foredoomed to failure. The men who constitute a team should know each other fairly well, and it should be understood by one and all that working together in the field imposes much strain on everyone. The members of the team should have spent some time together before going to the field, and while in the field, frequent discussions are essential. Success is even more difficult for an inter-disciplinary team. Ordinarily when several specialists come together at a meeting, their failure to communicate with each other is more pronounced than their success.

I am deliberately emphasising the difficulties involved in teamwork as I do not find sufficient appreciation of them. What one finds prevalent instead is both a cavalier as well as a cynical attitude towards teamwork. Teams are launched at short notice, no care is given to the selection of the personnel, and there is no awareness of the kind of problem that will crop up when several people, some of them mutual strangers, work together. A team is often launched not because the problem needs a team, but because it is believed, perhaps rightly, that Foundations favour teams, especially inter-disciplinary ones, in preference to one-man projects. A problem is often selected not because it is important but because it is likely to find Foundation support. Social anthropologists then choose only those problems for which they can obtain financial support from the Government or a Foundation or an international organisation. In effect, only problems having a practical bearing are chosen. But problems having a practical importance may not be—and usually are not—important theoretically. This will force social anthropology—and other social sciences as well—to become the handmaiden of social work. Some people may welcome such a prospect, but I for one hold that the ultimate aim of social anthropology is to advance our knowledge of how human societies work and change, irrespective of the practical use such knowledge will be put to.

Numerical Data

Until recently, social anthropologists have displayed shyness towards the quantification of data and the application of statistical techniques in their field work. This has been due partly to the fact that the peoples studied were primitives who neither remembered nor recorded the dates of such events as birth, marriage, divorce and death. (Even peasants in many parts of India cannot recall the dates of important events in their lives. One of the first things an investigator has to do is to construct a local chronology on the basis of important local events like flood, famine or a big man's death.) Again, since until the late twenties British and American anthropologists were either evolutionists or diffusionists, there was no inclination to quantify. It is only when concepts of function and structure became central to social anthropology, that need for quantification began to be felt. Thus whereas formerly it was enough to say that in two different societies there was a preference for marrying mother's brother's daughter, nowadays an anthropologist would try to find out how many of the total number of marriages in either society are with mother's brothers' daughters. He would also try to relate it to other institutions of the society. The sanctions which are brought to bear on those who fail to marry their mother's brother's daughter would also be mentioned preferably from actual case histories. Nowadays an anthropologist carries out a census of people, livestock, houses and, less frequently, of occupations. Without the first, no meaningful statement can be made about the family and residence patterns of the people he is studying. These patterns are related to other factors such as income, occupation, and caste. In short, with social anthropology becoming definitely sociological in its orientation, the need for quantification has been felt. And with the extension of the field of social anthropology to the study of large villages, towns/factories, and even regions, statistical techniques will have to be increasingly employed. As mentioned earlier, a knowledge of elementary statistical techniques should be regarded as part and parcel of the equipment of a social anthropologist. It goes without saying, however, that quantification should be resorted to only when necessary and not as a fetish.

While the tendency to quantification as well as the employment of statistical technique is to be welcomed wholeheartedly, it is to be hoped that this will not lead to the belief that everything can be measured and that only those things which can be measured are worthwhile. For several years to come, to say the least, our best insights into social life may come from work which has not involved the use of statistics.

Questionnaires

The increasing use of questionnaires is to be welcomed, especially in intensive studies. The use of a question does not necessarily mean that the investigator goes to the respondent questionnaire in hand, and writes down answers in his presence. The investigator might carry the questionnaire in his head, and often, this may ensure better results than waving it before the respondent. The questionnaire, drawn up by one who knows the art of asking questions, and administered by someone who has a grounding in social anthropology and is conscientious and tactful, is a legitimate weapon in the armoury of the social anthropologist. But the widespread tendency to rely entirely on it, and to use lengthy questionnaires I came across one which was over 125 pages long! administered by investigators lacking sufficient training, is nothing short of disaster. I know that in one part of rural India that the sight of the callow investigator armed with an immense questionnaire rolled up like an umbrella. caused: panic among peasants who with peasant guile found means of escaping the new torture. The investigator is usually under pressured to complete so many schedules per day and this results in haste if not in downright dishonesty.
data collected in this manner goes into our official handbooks and reports. Policy-makers as well as social scientists depend on such data. It is high time we had a committee of social scientists drawn from different disciplines to go into the question of the degree of reliability of the various kinds of statistical data incorporated in our official publications. Any development programme based on doubtful statistics is bound to cause much unnecessary suffering and frustration.

Dangers of "Practical" Research

Here it is necessary to mention certain developments which should make every social scientist apprehensive about the future. While agreeing that research is a normal part of a university teacher's duties, one cannot but be concerned about the kind of research done in the social sciences and the manner of doing it. Firstly, and most pernicious of all, is the fact that university teachers do not any longer pursue a problem because it is intrinsically important and interesting. The problems on which university teachers are working seem to have been given to them by one or other agency of the Government of India, or a State Government, or a foreign colleague. More frequently than not, the 'problem' is not a problem in the academic sense at all but only in an administrative sense. I grant that it is supremely important for public health that our rural people should use lavatories, but I do not think this problem is important in a theoretical sense. Until recently very little money has been available for the social sciences and this may be a reason why social scientists feel that any research is better than none. But to leave the initiative in formulating problems for research to non-academic bodies will be disastrous for social sciences. It is indeed tragic that very few seem to regard this state of affairs as unusual and unhealthy. In fact there is a certain complacency which suggests that the implications of the present trend are not widely realised. Or is the truth that Indian social scientists are not really creative and that they are pleased when someone considers that they can be put to useful work? I cannot understand this passion for being useful.

Misuses and Abuses

There is also emerging a new type of research-structure. At the top of the pyramid sits the director of a research project, usually an academic entrepreneur able to secure funds from some organisation or from the Government. Beneath him is a deputy director actually in charge of the project. Below him is a superintendent to draft questionnaires and to analyse the data, and to write the report under the supervision of the deputy director. Finally, there are the hewers of wood and drawers of water: the investigators (sometimes divided into 'junior' and 'senior') who do the dirty work. They are either M A or Ph D students, and they have to do what they are told. The deputy director usually takes the chair at conferences except on those rare occasions when the director himself attends. The report is written in six months or less it is indeed a mercy that many reports do not go beyond the mimeograph stage.

No social scientist who cares for the healthy growth of the social sciences in India can remain passive, a mere spectator of what is happening today. There is no doubt whatever that something akin to Gresham's Law is operating in research, just as Parkinson's Law is operating in social science departments and institutes. Under these conditions no work of distinction and originality is likely to emerge in the near future in social anthropology or in any other social science. Gone indeed are the poverty-stricken but leisurely years, when a scholar could pursue his own interest, in academic obscurity, unknown to planners, politicians, and welfare workers.