

Ethnography

Ethnography involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions- in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research'

(Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995)

Ethnography is a qualitative research method which involves a detailed study of a particular cultural group. The word ethnography comes from Greek words "Ethnos" meaning:- people and "Graphein" meaning:- writing. That is why Ethnography is also known as "culture writing". Ethnographic studies focus on large cultural groups of people who interact over time.

Bernardino de Sahagún is known as the first modern ethnographer.

- Ethnographer
 - a. take part in the life of people.
 - b. take place in natural settings of the subjects.
 - c. becomes the research instrument.
 - d. tries to construct a representation of the world.
 - e. tries to produce a holistic description of the culture.

Advantages of Ethnography

- Gives a rich, detailed picture of a particular situation than abstracting one/two aspects in isolation.
- Findings based on natural setting and lives of the people
- Good for studies where the topic
 - is complex
 - and embedded in a social system that is not fully understood
- Ethnography can be used for studying something over along period (e.g. introduction of a new system)

Disadvantages of Ethnography

- High demands of the researcher
- Ethnography = "story-telling"
- No reproducing of findings to any other solution
- Not as well-established as surveys/experiments
- Ethnographer is not then immersed in a culture as a traditional ethnographer is

Challenges of Ethnography

- Very time consuming
- Completely reliant on the individual researcher (or a small team)

- Difficult to gain full access
- Difficult to achieve objective distance and the danger of 'going native'
- Reporting findings and the role of interpretation
- Ethical dilemmas of participation

RAI BAHADUR SARAT CHANDRA ROY(1871-1942)

Sarat Chandra Roy has made valuable contributions with reference to Indian anthropology. He is thus regarded as Father of Indian ethnology. He was born on 4th Nov., 1871 in a village of Khulna district to Purna Chandra Roy (father) and Smt. Rajlakshmi Devi (mother). In 1888, he passed Matriculation from City Collegiate School in Calcutta. In 1895, he obtained a B.L. degree from Rippon College (now Surendranath College), Calcutta.

He had immense concern for the poor tribals of Chota Nagpur region and thus he dedicated his services as a lawyer for their upliftment. He started to explore and observe their culture, custom and dialect. Sarat Chandra Roy gave much weightage to learn the dialects of the various tribes of the region. He had no formal training, but he managed to create a good rapport by his ability and knowledge. He learnt of tribals and their problems. He wanted anthropology to be there as a subject in all Universities and also as a requirement of officers in administration and bureaucracy. He wrote a book titled Munda and their Country which was first monograph written by an Indian writer on an Indian tribe. He produced many monographs on different tribes such as The Oroans of Chotanagpur (1915), Birhor (1925), Hill Bhuiyas of Orissa (1935) and the Kharia (1937).

In 1921, he founded a research journal Man in India in Ranchi that would be the authority in finding out a current interpretation of the evolution of Indian Man in respect of racial affinities, mentality and culture. He became the President of the Anthropology and Ethnography Section of the Indian Science Congress Association. He was elected as a member of Bihar Legislative Council for several terms (1921 to 1937). His devoted services to field of Anthropology provided him due recognition. He received Kaiser-i-Hindi Silver medal (1913) and the title of 'Rai Bahadur' (1919). He has also made significant contribution to field of Physical anthropology and Prehistoric archaeology. In 1920, he also became an elected Honorary Member of the Folklore Society of London. He died on 30th April, 1942 after a period of extreme illness.

His major contribution to anthropology can be categorised as:

1. Tribal Study
2. Folklore and Caste study
3. Utilisation of Applied anthropology in tribal welfare

1. Tribal Study

S.C. Roy firstly studied the Munda tribe of Chota Nagpur. He undertook study on their customs, beliefs, traditions, life-ways and dialect. In His book Munda and their Country he traced the origin of the tribe utilising folklore, language and prehistoric evidences. He discussed their history and their land systems in great detail. Funding was made available to him by the Government of Bihar under Sir Edward Gait, the then Governor of Bihar. Unlike other anthropologists, he emphasized that knowledge of history of a tribe helps to understand culture better. In his book, he provides an ethnographic detail about their physicality, material culture, religion, festivals, spiritual world, folklore and culture.

His book The Oroan of Chota Nagpur explains social organisation of the tribe. He also mentioned about the prevalence of youth Dormitory, the village panchayat and the Paraha system and explained function of dormitory in social and economic life of the Oroan. His book Oroan Religion and Customs showed the effect of acculturation and rapid culture contact among

the Oraons, as seen in the Bhagat movement. He also provided information about various reform movements among the Oraon. He also became a member of the Provincial Committee that sat with the Simon Commission in this year. He gave a detailed account of religious and magical beliefs, feasts and festivals and the magical practices of the Oraon. He suggested that various feasts and festivals inculcate social solidarity in the village people.

His Book Hill Bhuiya of Orissa (1935) provides a comparative account of plain and hill Bhuiyas. Besides several monographs, he wrote several research papers on life and culture of various tribes such as totemism among the Asur and Pahira of Chota Nagpur. He also worked on kinship system and human sacrifice in various tribes of North-east India.

2. Folklore and Caste Study

In 1932-33, he was elected as President of the Anthropology and Folklore section of the All India Oriental Conference. S. C. Roy emphasized the fact that the study of folklore should not be restricted to traditional customs, rites and beliefs and should encompass close observation on folksongs, folk rites, folktraditions, folk beliefs associated with superstition, omen, folk magic, folk abuse etc. He regarded folklore as 'pre-history of human mind' as it provides clue to intellectual evolution of human society.

In 1934-35, his book Caste, Race and Religion in India was published. He made an extensive study of caste, race and religion in India. He explored various ethnographic literatures on caste and tribes in India and even studied Hindu literature to study the origin of caste system in India.

3. Utilisation of Applied anthropology in tribal welfare

Roy strongly emphasized the need to utilise anthropological knowledge and perspective about various tribes to resolve the administrative problems faced by poor and down-trodden tribes in India. He wanted to provide anthropological training to administrative officers, judicial, forest and excise officers so as to promote tribal welfare. He has shown that timely intervention by anthropologist can curb stress and strain condition in society. He played a pivotal role in resolving problems between Munda tribal people and police officials at time of non-cooperation agitation (1921).

Besides these, he has made valuable contribution to field of Physical anthropology and Prehistoric archaeology. In 1920, Principles and Methods of Physical Anthropology was published based on readership lectures given in Patna University between January and March 1920. He made significant contribution to prehistoric archaeology by excavating Asura site. He made exploratory investigations at the site and found stone temples and sculptures, cinerary urns and columns of sculptural atones which were attributed to Asura people.

Anthropology is frequently accused of being the study of 'Primitive Society.' Yet, this is because "primitive society exhibits the ground-plan on which the more complex structure that we call civilization has been built up" (Roy; 1937: 249). Such studies should be followed by studies of complex and advanced societies. Different cultures at various levels of complexity should be analyzed, compared and comprehended (Roy; 1937: 249).

On the issue of charismatic figures, he says:

“It is on these horses of thought, action and feeling, who with their kindling ideas and throbbing words, and inspiring message and example, act as levers to lift society to higher levels by introducing new ideals and viewpoints, it is on them that the measure and standard of a people’s culture depend.” (Roy; 1937: 252)

According to Roy (1937) anthropology is for use, for nation-building in a positive sense, for fellow-feeling among human beings and for writing the eternal history of humankind.

S. C. Roy was no objective anthropologist. He began with the idea of helping the oppressed tribals of the region. In order to reframe the way outsiders manipulated them, he had to prepare an outline of their customary laws. In order to do so, he had to study their oral and mythical history, their social and cultural life, at first hand. The only discipline that suited him was that of the anthropologist. He wished anthropology to be there as a subject in all Universities and also as a requirement of officers in administration and bureaucracy.

It soon became apparent that early accounts of Indian tribes were mostly written by British authors. Out of 100 articles on anthropology published between 1784 to 1883, in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, only 3 articles were by Indians. In Calcutta Review, there were 53 articles on anthropology published between 1843-1883, only three by Indians (Roy; 1992: 13). There were no monographs on tribes by Indian authors.

Sarat Chandra Roy took care to learn the dialects of the various tribes of the region. He had no formal training, yet he managed to create a good rapport by his ability and knowledge. At the time there were very few roads. Photos exist in his house showing his travels on elephant-back through jungles. A large map also exists showing all the villages of the area. S. C. Roy marked all the villages he had visited with a red circle. The entire map was a mass of red. Few villages survived being marked. During his later years he frequently talked of his work to Nirmal Kumar Bose and to his youngest daughter, Mira Roy, who died in February 2006. According to him, all his works needed to be revised to include individual differences that occur in each of the different villages. As a first step, he made notebooks for each thana and tehsil where he numbered and noted down one village on each page. On these pages, he noted whatever information he knew regarding the villages. This was a remarkable attitude of collecting local data, which is only now becoming popular.

Yet, Roy’s work must also be seen in the context of the everyday life of the Oraon which did not have (and still does not have) a structuralized behaviour pattern for behaving with outsiders. S.C. Roy was also one of the ‘diku’ yet clearly was never called such names.

Further, the researcher in his attempt to gain intimacy becomes a ‘friend’, a term which an Oraon well understands. This deep effect of the anthropologist on tribal society was well observed by D.N. Majumdar:

“How far this was true was seen by us in 1921, when some of us, then students of anthropology at Calcutta visited the Munda country with Dewan Bahadur L.K. Anantkrishna Iyer, Reader in Anthropology, Calcutta University. We visited hamlet after hamlet, we went into the interior villages of the Munda country, we enquired about the intimate social life of the people and everywhere we visited we felt the invisible presence of Roy. Every village we passed through, we were greeted with shouts of Sarat Babu Ki Jay. It is no wonder that Roy represented the tribal people of his district in Bihar Legislature for successive terms.” (in Roy; 1980: 210)

It is the social-ness of the work of S. C. Roy that is his main advantage. His house had a set of rooms prepared for his tribal clients so that those who came from far-off villages could stay on while his case was being fought in court. Ultimately, S. C. Roy was thinking not just

in the tribal language but in terms of their own worldview. An incident that shows this side of him relates to the construction of a bridge over a river at Lohardaga:

“The river side had Hindu and Oraon settlements. Since the bridge was washed out twice earlier, the contractor wanted to placate the Gods of both the villages. He repaired an old dilapidated temple of Hindus and presented a flag with a railway engine painted on it to the Oraon which was a symbol of power to that parha of Oraons in the Jatra festival. But envious of this, one of the neighbouring parha made a same kind of flag having the emblem and led [to] trouble at the annual Jatra festival at Bhasko. Two persons were killed. Fearing similar trouble next year, Roy was consulted by the sub-divisional Magistrate and he then presented a flag emblomed with an aeroplane and explained the superiority of it to the senior members of the parha of the latter village next year. A happy solution came out and no trouble occurred at the jatra that year.” (Roy; 1980: 215-216)

In the last years of his life he was very ill. He found no strength to get up from his bed. He slept straight with his feet pointing through the doorway to the length of his study. He would request his servants to turn his book-shelves towards him so that he could look at his beloved books all day. Once, in a moment of sadness he told his daughter that if he were to die, to be re-born in another place, he only wished he retained the memories of all the books he had read intact.

His vision and his genius were his alone. None after him was ever able to put together a plausible worldview of the various tribals of the region into a whole. When he died on 30th April, 1942 on the holy day of Buddha Purnima, he left a yawning emptiness. His students often berated his constant delays and re-corrections of his own articles since it kept him from writing more. He wrote much but he took away much more. Notes on improvements of his various books abound, ignored and forgotten in that sprawling empty house of his where only his youngest daughter stayed till her death in 2006. A museum, a library, a table and a chair exactly as he left it and whole generations of anthropologists and tribals who come to buy his books and copies of the journal that he started now frequent the house where anthropology began in this part of the world.

Verrier Elwin (1902-1964)

Dr. Henry Verrier Holman Elwin was born on 29th August 1902 at Dover, Kent (England). Verrier Elwin was a British-born anthropologist, ethnologist and tribal activist, who began his career in India as a Christian missionary. One of the dramatic personae of Indian Anthropology.

Elwin came to India in 1927 to join the newly formed Christa Seva Sangha, an Anglican Order in Pune (Maharashtra). During the period from 1928 to 1931, Elwin was involved in the national movement as an associate of Gandhi who used to call him 'son'. After 1932, Elwin became associated with the tribal peoples of India. He lived nearly 30 years of his life with the tribals of India and during this period he observed their life and undertook research on them.

Verrier Elwin came to India as a Christian preacher, but took up anthropology as a primary interest. He was an ethnographer and in 1932 began to work among the Baiga tribe of Madhya Pradesh. This was later published as *The Baiga* in 1939. This was introduced by Hutton. It was cited often but it contained the first citation of his statement on isolationism for tribals. He had noted that the Baigas were being destroyed by the landlords and the missionaries. To protect them from exploitation he suggested that the State should prevent or control their interaction with outsiders.

Verrier Elwin has always been associated with the issue of the integration of tribal societies with the greater Indian society. Such an integrationist stance was initially opposed by him, when he proposed that tribals should be left alone instead of being constantly interfered with and acculturated. This gave him the reputation of being a person who advocated separate 'reserved national parks' for tribals. Such national parks he also called 'Tribal Reserve Area.' Such a stance was also being used at the time by the United States government.

After this, Elwin went on to study the Murias of the Bastar region. He devoted one book to the study of the youth dormitories among the Murias there. It was seen from his work that such youth dormitories were an indispensable part of many other tribal societies as well. It was responsible for training the youth in various social activities and for initiating them into sexual activities. This led others to work on the activities of the youth dormitories in other tribal societies.

He went on to publish many more works on tribal and other cultures. He published one on the religion of the tribes, their folklore, myths of origin, etc. In a study of the Borneo highlanders he again supported isolationism. This was criticized by several nationalist leaders and pro-assimilation anthropologists. Finally, when Elwin wrote *A Philosophy For NEFA* he propagated a more assimilationistic stance in collaboration with the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. In his integrationist model of the tribe, he propagated the idea, following Nehru's panchsheel that the tribes should be allowed to develop according to their own dictates.

Elwin went on to become a member of several committees on tribal affairs and also an editor of *Man in India*. His house in Shillong now houses his wife and son, and a host of memorabilia that exhibit his travels among the tribals of India. Many of the photographs that he took now adorn the walls of the Museum and Department of Anthropology, NEHU, Shillong.

Verrier Elwin's death Indian ethnography has sustained a grievous loss, and the tribal people of India have lost a sincere and well-meaning friend. Elwin came to ethnography from till Immanitres at Oxford. and had no formal training in anthropology. As he has himself stated. " I did not come to tribal India (now exactly twenty-seven years ago) from a school of anthropology, but from Gandhiji's ashram at Sevagram".

"The Murias and Their Ghotul" , "Religion of an Indian Tribe" , "The Baiga". "The Hondo Highlander" , and his other works are contributions of lasting significance to the

descriptive ethnography of Indian tribes. It was indeed fortunate that he wrote so prolifically for that is how he was able to fill some crying gaps in the ethnography of middle India. Orissa and the NEFA .

Elwin wrote so well that he made anthropology popular among the general public . This popularity was also partly due to a focussing of attention on marriage, sex and art, and to the neglect of subjects of serious professional concern such as kinship. economics, law and politics. In the last four decades anthropology has become increasingly professionalized and the days of the amateur-anthropologist are gone forever. Elwin is indeed one of the last and most distinguished of his kind .

Elwin loved the tribals and this is what endeared him to them and to many others including national leaders. His concern for them made him a passionate partisan' as is seen from his war-time pamphlet. "Loss of Nerve" . In it he pleaded strongly for protecting the tribals from contact with the more sophisticated people from the plains. He was attacked for his views and he subsequently modified them to some extent. The isolation of tribal people is no longer a practicable policy even if it seems the most obvious one. and the only thing to do is to extend education and other facilities to the tribes to enable them to advance to the level of the other sections of the population. Any other policy is wrong .

It is a tribute to the breadth of Elwin's mind that, in his later writings, he adopted a more realistic attitude to the problem of the tribals in India .

Elwin wrote delightfully . His "Leaves from an Indian Jungle " is a most readable diary which he kept during his early contact with the tribal folk of Central India.

A few years ago he published a collection of non-anthropological essays which included one on Sherlock Holmes and another on the human nose.

He was indeed a gifted, sensitive and dedicated man, and in his death India and Britain have lost a 'bridge-builder.'

Notable Work :- The Baiga , The Murias and their Ghotul

Awards :- Padma Bhushan (1961)