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Anthropology: A Bird's Eye View

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ANTHROPOLOGY: A Birds Eye View

Anthropology can be defined as the study of man. It developed in 19th century Europe. Discoveries in Geology, Genetics, Archaeology and Biology as well as exploration of the globe by Europeans and expansion of colonialism and European trade changed the then current ideas about what man was, how he came into existence and how he lived on the planet.

Anthropology is a highly complex discipline with many internal divisions and specializations. The branch of anthropology which attempts to study the origins and the development of mankind as a biological species is known as physical anthropology. The study of collective organization of humans into societies is known as social anthropology. How the members of a community have developed collective understandings as to what the world is like, how life must be lived in it, what is good and bad, right and wrong and just and unjust as well as their material and behavioral creations constitute the culture of that community. Culture is the subject matter of cultural anthropology. Then, given this social organization and its culture how do people in a community think? How do ideas occur to them? How are their feelings and emotions constituted? What are the social and cultural consequences of emotions and how do behaviours and beliefs form emotions? These are the problems of psychological anthropology.

Physical Anthropology

The discovery of early human forms during archaeological and geological explorations proved that man is an ancient animal who took his present day form only during the last twenty thousand years or so. Anthropologists, using geological techniques of carbon dating, have determined that the earliest known human form existed millions of years ago. The earliest known human type is known as Australopithecus. A kind of Australopithecus is also called Zinjanthropus. A later type is named Pithacanthropus. The most recent early man is known as Neanderthal. All these types existed long before modern man - you and I - came into existence.

Developments in biology, particularly the theory of evolution presented by Charles Darwin, and geology have provided anthropologists with insights into the way modern man developed from these early human types. When the earth came into being as a bubble of hot gases, gradually cooled down and began to harden into a solid form, many chemical processes occurred. As the primitive ecosystem interacted with these chemical processes certain combinations of matter became charged with a power to replicate themselves and survive by absorbing nutrients from the environment. That was how life emerged on this planet. That was how the first cell came into existence.

As time passed and the earth cooled further, and as these primitive molecular and cellular changes advanced this first life form divided itself into two distinct types: plants and animals. Each of these gradually developed a virtually countless number of distinctive types and internal variations within these types. Among the animals chordates appeared and produced the vertebrates. These vertebrates - animals with backbones, then produced internal variations and the mammals came into existence. Mammals, too, were various. Some of them lived in water (like the whales) while others were amphibious (like seals), terrestrial (four legged and two legged) or airborne (bats). Some four legged terrestrial animals (the quadrupeds) also lived on trees (the arboreal type). These were the first monkeys. And man was one of them.

Biologist Ernst Mendel showed that the process of variation within a type, known as a "species" depends on the nature of chromosomes and genes in the cells of that species. New types of species appeared when, because of sudden changes occurred in these genes in the chromosomes.

Darwin used this knowledge to show how the process of evolution occurred. The earth is a limited place. On it were these miriads of species. All of them attempted to go on living and multiply in order to perpetuate the species. This produced an intense struggle among the various animals and between animals and plants. Only the fittest survived this struggle. Others perished. And a species became the fittest through adaptation to the emerging conditions. The adaptation entailed genetic changes which produced the

variations.

Among the monkeys were many internal variations. In addition to the monkeys who lived mostly on trees there were the ancestors of the chimpanzees, gibbons and gorillas as well as the ancestors of mankind. As I said before, man is a monkey. We, as a species, have gone through a vast number of genetic variations and adaptations to become the way we are today. The branch of anthropology, which borrows ideas from biology, geology, biochemistry, etc. and analyses the nature of the early human forms such as the australopithecus, zinjanthropus, pithacanthropus, neanderthal, to understand how the human species came into being is called physical anthropology.

Physical anthropology does not study man as a special animal. It takes man as one among many other species of life, going through the process of evolution and changing constantly in order to survive and thrive. It attempts to study the biological constitution of early human types and how this was suitable to survive in the environment in which they lived. It also studies how these early types were socially organized and how they had perished. Physical anthropologists study various monkeys, the closest non-human relatives of man, in order to understand the essential characteristics of the general class to which all monkeys, including man, belong.

Physical anthropology has produced an internal specialization known as biological anthropology. It attempts to understand the biological aspects of human thought, emotions and behaviours. It also studies how various human communities physically survive in their environments.

Social Anthropology

Social anthropology focuses on the social organization of contemporary human groups. The growth of global transportation, communication and colonialism paved way for hitherto unknown human societies to encounter one another. Such encounters proved that no two communities are alike in the way people relate to each other. Social anthropology thus emerged, to examine how people in a society relate to one another.

Take, for example, the family. Every society has its own kind of family organization. How the members of a Chinese family behave towards each other is different from the way members of an American family behave towards each other and the organization of the Tamil family in Sri Lanka is different from that of the Sinhala family but closer to the Sinhala than it is to the American or the Chinese family. In different societies different people are considered as important members of the family. In Indian and Chinese families the grandparents are the most important people in the family. In America, the parents are the most important.

In the same way different communities have different ideas about kinship - how people are related to each other. We all know that all people in a large society such as ours are not related to each other. Some are relatives, others are friends. Most are strangers. Some relatives are more important than the others. In some other societies, which are very small in size, virtually everybody is a relative of everybody else and there are no strangers unless they come from somewhere else.

Social anthropologists study these relationships. They have classified all relatives into two basic types, namely, consanguinal and affinal. Consanguinal relatives are blood relatives. Affinal relatives are relatives through marriage. Who is a blood relative varies from society to society. In most societies such as ours a person's father's male relatives are considered as his blood relatives. In others, such as the Nayar society in Kerala, South India, it is the mother's relatives who are the blood relatives. Consanguinity or blood relationship is the principle used by people to trace their descent. Social anthropologists have discovered that what people consider as blood relationship is not always biological but sometimes socially created.

How important the affinal relatives are in a person's life also varies from one society to another. In our society a spouse's immediate relatives have a considerable influence on a person's life. In addition, very large class of affinal relatives influence the marriage as well as the individual lives of the couple. But not in other societies. Among the Americans the affinal relatives, except for the immediate family of the spouse, are insignificant. Among the

Dobu - a group of people living on an island in the Pacific Ocean, who practice matrilineal descent, a person's father's relatives are very insignificant. For a Dobuan, all relatives are mother's relatives. For them, the mother's brothers are more important than the father.

Marriage, therefore, is an important institution. It socially defines a person. Social anthropologists have discovered that there are a large number of forms of marriage. In many societies marriage among the relatives is preferred. Among the Sinhala and Tamil people a man's father's sister's daughter or the mother's brother's daughter who is younger than him is the most eligible partner while among the North Indians this is strictly prohibited but not illegal. In America this is so much looked down upon it is illegal. In certain African societies a woman can marry another woman and have a man to produce children from her wife on behalf of her dead brother. Such children go as the dead brother's children. Very strange. But true.

Family, kinship and marriage are the most important institutions which organize social relations. But there are other institutions which determine even kinship and marriage. All people in a society are not equal. Social anthropologists show that, whether we like it or not, societies are layered. Some people are believed to be better than and superior to others. In most societies the older people receive more respect than the younger ones. Wealthy people are more important and have more power than the poorer people. A person's position in the society based on his wealth is known as his social class. In Indian society, in which we Sri Lankans are also partners, there is the institution of caste. A person is born into a caste. He cannot change it even if he wants to. There are high castes and low castes. Low castes are expected to respect the high castes. A very wealthy or a very highly educated man may be a very low caste man while a poor uneducated man may be of high caste. But the wealthy educated man is expected to respect the poor less educated man because of the caste. This often produces very complex social situations. In Sri Lanka also caste is a very influential institution. Often, jobs are determined by caste. Such layering of societies is known as social stratification. Social stratification influences kinship and marriage. Usually people marry within their own class and caste and have relatives who belong to the same social stratum.

Family, kinship, marriage, age, caste, and class all define a person in the society and what he or she can do in it. A person's place in the society is known as his or her "social status" (not to be confused with the term "status" as in common parlance). For example, a man's status may be that of a forty year old man, an anthropologist, a teacher, a father, an uncle, a high/low class/caste rich/poor and so on. He maintains his social status by acting according to the rules that are socially considered as proper for his status. For example, our anthropologist must behave as a forty year old teacher, a husband, a father and so on and not as, say, a thirteen year old unmarried unemployed school boy. Behaviour according to the status is known as the "role." Each "status" has several "roles." Our anthropologist has to play the role of an anthropologist as well as the roles of father, husband, brother, son and so on. When people do not behave according to their status and play their roles others in the society try to correct them. There are various ways to do this. Law is one way. Laughter, ridicule, jeering, and ostracism are all ways of forcing people to stay within their statuses and play their roles properly. This is known as social control.

The statuses in a society are interrelated in a very complex manner. They form a network of relationships. Such a network is known as the social structure of the society. People exist and act within the social structure according to the culture of their society.

Cultural Anthropology

Culture is the subject matter of cultural anthropology. What is culture? The culture of a society is the way its people figure out the nature of the world, how to live in it and what they create in it. In order to understand the culture it is necessary to see how people behave because behaviour shows culture. On the other hand, in order to figure why our people behave the way they do it is necessary to know according what principles they behave, it is necessary to know their culture.

People in different societies do not live in the same "world" because societies see the physical world differently. The world of the scientists, the world of astronomy, chemistry, physics, geology, botany, zoology and even of anthropology, is a very recent world. The world of the scientists was created in the European societies and American and is now

international. But the cultural way of seeing the world is strictly restricted to the members of a culture. Even though science is internationally intelligible a cultural way of viewing the world is incomprehensible to those who do not belong to that culture. Often, cultural worlds are not much interested in the physical properties of the world. Rather, they focus on the moral and ethnical properties of the world.

For example, Christians believe that the world was created by God. This idea is incomprehensible to Buddhists and various other cultures. Buddhists and Hindus believe that there is life after death occurring in cycles of rebirth known as the Samsara; an idea utterly strange to the Jews, Christians and Muslims. There are other world views which the Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, Jews and Muslims cannot understand. Each of these is a unique way of understanding how human life came into existence and how life goes on now and after death. All these conceptions lay down the rules governing the ideas of right and wrong and good and bad in personal conduct (morals) and social behaviour (ethics). Even notions of what is beautiful and what is ugly are defined by such world views. It is within such worlds that people define the nature of man and of others in the world, establish social relationships and societies.

One important aspect of culture is religion. There is no area of activity not covered by religion. All morality and ethics have a religious background. Thus, cultural anthropologists try to understand various religions and the elements common to all religions. They try to find out how religious ideas come into being, what aspect of communal living engenders a certain religious idea and how that idea influences behaviours and other aspects of social life.

Besides religion there are other areas of culture which anthropologists study. Language is one such institution. Language gives us information about how the users of that language see the world and organize their ideas about the world and about their experiences within it. No two languages are alike. In addition to the obvious differences in sounds and meanings of words there are differences in the way languages have the sense of the tense (present, past and the future). While English and Sinhala have definite words to indicate the past

day ("yesterday" in English and "eeye" in Sinhala) and the coming day ("tomorrow" in English and "heta" in Sinhala), the North Indian language Hindi has only one word, "kal," to call both days. That shows a certain difference in the sense of time. In the same way, personhood is defined variously. This is where gender comes in. What belongs to neuter gender in one language is either masculine or feminine gender in another. Tables and chairs, for example, have no gender in English and Sinhala but in French tables are masculine and chairs are feminine. Further, in some languages verbs have definite indications of gender. For example, in Sinhala, we say "malli bath kai" (brother eats rice) and "nangi bath kanniya" (sister eats rice) but in English, as the translations show, there are no such gender implications in verbs. These linguistic aspects of culture show different ways of organizing time, personhood, action and so on in these societies.

The grammar of a language and how ideas are assembled to make sentences show the way people think. Since thinking is not possible without language, the structure of the language indicates the way the mind works. The time and personhood, as expressed in language, show how the various cultures place gender and time and relate the rest of the elements of the world to these. Whatever is not linguistically expressed is also not thought about. This is why, in English, there are no equivalents to Sinhala, Tamil, and Hindu "karma, nirvana, punya, papa" and so on. In the same way it is very hard to translate an English poem into Sinhala or Tamil because the thoughts and words are organized in ways unfamiliar to Sinhala and Tamil cultures. How can you translate "A stich in time saves nine" or "A cat has nine lives" to give the same ideas in Sinhala or Tamil? You cannot.

Various cultures see the human and non-human world differently. For example caste, which I talked about earlier, is inconceivable to an American or a Frenchman because they see all men as equal at birth, an idea which a Brahmin in India never understands. It is because different cultures place people differently in their respective worlds that each society has its own unique social statuses, roles, kinship organizations, marriage patterns and other aspects of social relations. That is also why they behave so differently. An American father treats his teenage son as a social equal while an Indian father sees his son as an inferior person. In New Guinea, an Island in the Pacific Ocean, a number of small

scale societies, known as tribes, exist. In some of these societies men are seen as physically weaker than women and are not allowed to do any hard work. Instead, men are supposed to stay at home, look after the children, cook, wash clothes and do the household work. It is women who do the hard work such as hunting, locating other sorts of food, climbing trees and so on. This is inconceivable, say, in Kuwait or Egypt. In Sri Lanka also all communities see women as weaker than men.

Even the non-human world is classified in various ways by different cultures. Take the "bodhi" tree. It is sacred to the Buddhists and Hindus who really do not see it as a "tree" in the same way they see coconut trees or some other wild trees. For them it is sacred, representing the Buddha or some gods. But for an American or a Muslim it is merely a tree, a rather useless one except that it gives shade in the bus halting places and markets. Or, take the cow. For Hindus she is a sacred animal, more like the mother. For a Westerner or a Muslim a cow is an animal, a source of milk, butter, meat, leather, glue and fertilizer. Never invite a Hindu to eat beef curry. He will be seriously insulted and will consider you as a barbarian. Likewise the Jews and Muslims never eat pork. For them the pig represents everything that is filthy and objectionable. Never go to a Muslim grocery and ask for pork. If you do, be prepared to run!

Cultural anthropologists also study the material productions of societies. Material culture includes things that people use and make as well as culture specific behaviours such as forms of greeting and dance, art works and so on. Because of the climatic and geological differences in the various parts of the world societies have developed area specific material cultures. Where rubies and emeralds abound jewelry and sacred objects are adorned with them and are also given religious meanings while where these are not available they have no uses and meanings. And Lapis lazuli, a beautiful blue mineral abundant in the Middle East and sacred to the ancient Egyptians, was used in jewelry making in Egypt but is unknown and has no use in Sri Lanka. There is no place for fishing gear in cultures existing in desert regions and camels are curious looking but utterly useless animals to the Japanese. Traditional Sri Lankan artists made paints out of trees and minerals available in Sri Lanka while the Kwakiutle Indians in the North-West coast of America use entirely different

materials to produce their paints. It is not only a question of using the available materials. The properties of these materials determine the shape of things produced. Greek vases have shapes that can be wrought from the kind of clay available in Greece while Chinese vases have shapes best produced with porcelain. These, in turn, give rise to ideas about ideal shapes, beauty, the best ways to produce things and the best ways to behave.

In addition to the above branches there are further divisions in Anthropology. Cognitive anthropology specializes in studying how people see, hear, smell, feel, even count in terms of their culturally constituted world views. This is very important in the study of behaviours and ideas of people in societies outside one's own.

Archaeological anthropology attempts to understand how archaeological remains of ancient societies existed and what caused their demise. Political anthropology attempts to understand how power and authority are distributed in the social structure and how these change over time. Economic anthropology studies the relationships between the economy, social structure, politics and culture. Psychological anthropology examines how the personalities of the members of a society have common characteristics, how some individuals vary from these common characteristics, what social institutions and cultural ways cause these similarities and differences and, in turn, how the nature of personality development influences the growth of social institutions and cultural forms.

So, you see, anthropology is a very complex discipline. It is complex because its subject matter, man, is very complex. It is important and necessary to study anthropology because, unlike in the distant past, today's societies constantly encounter one another through international trade, politics and cultural exchanges. Even more important is the fact that today's societies are more complex than the societies of the ancient world. Take our own Sri Lanka. It is constituted of four main communities: Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim and Burgher. These four communities have their own cultures, social structures and personality types. As a result the integration of these four peoples to develop a nation has become a major problem in modern Sri Lanka. We have serious linguistic problems, problems of communal rights, problems of economic opportunities and problems of cross-cultural

communication. Think about the JVP and the crises of caste, social justice, economic justice and so on that have emerged. Think about the LTTE and the issues in the North-East. Think about the position of the Muslims in the midst of these conflicts. How can we resolve them? One key ingredient for the solution is cross-cultural understanding of possible differences and recognition of the common humanity that we all share.

Further, consider our own position in the world - our position as a miniscule nation attempting to survive amidst the giants on the earth. As physical anthropology and archaeological anthropology inform us the earth is our collective ecological niche. We have to live with and communicate with so many different cultures. Our survival depends on how we understand others and make others understand us. It is with these ends in mind that we should take anthropology seriously, as a discipline which addresses serious issues.