

Chapter - 5

Indian Sociologists

Q1 :

How did Ananthakrishna Iyer and Sarat Chandra Roy come to practice social anthropology?

Answer :

Ananthakrishna Iyer came to practice social anthropology by voluntarily helping the British administrators in ethnographic surveys of India. He was initially a clerk and then became a college teacher at Ernakulum. In 1902, he was asked by the Dewan of Cochin to assist with an ethnographic survey of the state. Later, he worked for British government as unpaid Superintendent of Ethnography. His work received appreciation from British anthropologists and administrators. Iyer became a reader at the University of Madras and set up the post-graduate department of anthropology at the University of Calcutta. Thus, he became the first self-taught anthropologist.

Sarat Chandra Roy was educated in law and English. He gave up his law practice and became a school teacher in Ranchi. He was appointed as the official interpreter in the court after he resumed his law practice. Gradually, he became interested in the tribal society, as he had to interpret the tribal customs in the court. He gained considerable knowledge on the culture and society of the tribal people of Chhotanagpur. Roy produced valuable monographs and research articles on this subject. He travelled and did intensive fieldwork pertaining to the tribal community.

Thus, the experiences gained by Iyer and Roy in the course of their work led to their interest in social anthropology.

Q2 :

What were the main arguments on either side of the debate about how to relate to tribal communities?

Answer :

The main arguments, on either side of the debate about relating to tribal communities, were led by the British administrator anthropologists and the nationalists.

According to the British, the tribes of India were primitive people and had a different culture from the Hindus. They believed that the simple tribal people would suffer exploitation and cultural degradation at the hands of Hindu people who wanted the assimilation of tribal people with them. Thus, they needed to be protected by the state in order to safeguard their interests.

On the other hand, the nationalists, of whom G.S Ghurye was the most famous exponent, argued that the tribes of India were not backward, but had been interacting with the rest of Hindu society over a long period. The process of assimilation had been experienced by all the communities in India and the tribes were only a step behind in this process.

According to nationalists, attempts to preserve tribal culture only contributed to their backwardness. They believed tribal society needed as much reform as Hindu society.

Thus, the main difference in both viewpoints was the perception about the impact of mainstream culture on tribes.

Q3 :

Outline the positions of Herbert Risley and G.S. Ghurye on the relationship between race and caste in India.

Answer :

Herbert Risley believed that human beings could be divided into separate races on the basis of their physical characteristics. His main argument was that caste originated in race because the different castes belonged to different racial types. He believed that the higher castes originated from Indo-Aryans while the lower castes originated from non-Aryan races. Risley was of the opinion that the conditions in India were suitable for studying racial evolution as inter-caste marriages were strictly prohibited in India.

Ghurye was of a different view. He believed that Risley's argument was partially correct and the argument of upper castes being Aryan and lower castes being non-Aryan was true only for north India. He further said that the prohibition of intermixing of different castes was only limited to the northern India, and people in other areas had been mixing for a long time. According to him, racial purity was preserved only in North India while other parts adopted the practice of endogamy only after variations had occurred in racial groups.

Q4 :

Summarise the social anthropological definition of caste.

Answer :

The social anthropological definition of caste was given by G.S Ghurye, which comprised six features. These were as follows:

(i) Caste is an institution based on segmental division. This means that the castes were different and closed segments that comprised people of an exclusive social order determined by birth. The individuals born in a particular caste would always remain in that caste.

(ii) Caste society is based on hierarchical division. The caste system was based on a hierarchical order, and each caste had unequal status as compared to others.

(iii) The institution of caste necessarily involves restrictions on social interaction, specially sharing of food. There were many restrictions in the caste system based on the ideas of purity and pollution.

(iv) Caste involves differential rights and duties for different caste as a consequence of hierarchy and restricted social interaction. These pertained to religious life and everyday practices.

(v) The choice of occupation, like caste itself, is decided by birth and is hereditary. It was a rigid form of division of labour. A person born as a shudra would always remain one, however hard he worked or whatever success he achieved.

(vi) Caste involves strict restrictions on marriage. The marriage between people of different castes was strictly prohibited and rules existed regarding both endogamy and exogamy.

Q5 :

What does D.P. Mukerji mean by a 'living tradition'? Why did he insist that Indian sociologists be rooted in this tradition?

Answer :

By 'living tradition', D.P. Mukerji means that the traditions were not only formed in the past but also kept on changing with the present and evolved over time. It manages to retain basic elements from the past. He insisted that Indian sociologists be rooted in this tradition because an Indian sociologist should be an Indian first, which means that he/she should understand his/her social system first.

Q6 :

What are the specificities of Indian culture and society, and how do they affect the pattern of change?

Answer :

The Indian culture and society are not individualistic like the western society. The behaviour of an Indian individual is fixed by his socio-cultural group. Hence, the Indian social system is oriented towards groups, unlike the western societies where people are highly individualistic. The actions of individuals in Indian society are mostly involuntary. The traditions are strongly rooted in the past.

Thus, there are fewer changes in Indian societies, as the pattern of desires of an individual are mostly governed by the societal traditions and norms. Changes occur more in adaptive form than any basic form. The role of economy as an internal source of change is diluted in Indian society. Conflict due to caste system causes adaptive changes without overriding the institution of caste.

Q7 :

What is a welfare state? Why is A.R. Desai critical of the claims made on its behalf?

Answer :

A.R. Desai explained three features of a welfare state. These were as follows:

- (i) A welfare state is a positive state that uses its power in order to implement social policies for the betterment of society. It is interventionist in nature.
- (ii) Democracy and democratic institutions are considered the most important factors for the emergence of the welfare state.
- (iii) A welfare state includes a mixed economy. It means the co-existence of both the private and state owned enterprises. The public sector concentrates on basic goods and social infrastructure, while the private industry produces consumer goods.

Desai is critical of welfare states like Britain, USA and countries in Europe. He argues that the claims of these states are exaggerated, while they are not even able to provide basic social and economic security to their citizens. They are unable to reduce economic inequality. The process of development in these states is not independent of market fluctuations. A high level of unemployment alongside excess economic capacity indicates the failure of welfare state. Therefore, A.R. Desai is critical of the claims made on behalf of welfare state and concludes that its existence is a myth.

Q8 :

What arguments were given for and against the village as a subject of sociological research by M.N. Srinivas and Louis Dumont?

Answer :

According to Louis Dumont, social institutions like caste were more important than the study of villages. He argued that villages are just a group of people, who live or die or may move to another location, but their social institutions always follow them. Hence, he thought that the study of village as a category should not be given much importance.

Contrary to this, M.N. Srinivas argued that the Indian villages were relevant social entities and historically the villages were a unifying factor in the Indian society. Further, he criticised the British administrators because they studied the villages as a self sufficient entity, and mentioned them as "little republics". With the help of historical and sociological data, M.N. Srinivas concluded that the Indian villages had undergone considerable change, were connected with the outside world and had always been a part of the Indian economy. Thus, he believed it was necessary to study the function of villages in the Indian social life.

Q9 :

What is the significance of village studies in the history of Indian sociology? What role did M.N. Srinivas play in promoting village studies?

Answer :

The study of Indian villages has always been important in the history of Indian sociology because of the following reasons:

(i) It provided with an opportunity to emphasise the importance of ethnographic research methods.

(ii) It provided examples of rapid social change that took place in the country after independence and implementation of planned development.

(iii) The village studies provided sociology with a new role in the context of independent nation as it enabled urban Indians and policy makers to form their opinions about developments in the villages of India.

M.N. Srinivas played a very important role in promoting village studies by concentrating his research on village areas. He conducted field work in villages and coordinated efforts at producing detailed ethnographic accounts of villages. His writings featured ethnographic accounts and historical and conceptual discussions about villages. He was critical of the arguments presented by the British anthropologists. He concluded that the village was as important as any other social institution. He also presented the links of the village community to the economy of the outside world.