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Introducing Anthropology and its Subject Matter

1.1 Definition, Scope and Subject Matter of Anthropology

1.1.1 Concepts in Anthropology

- **Etymology:** compound of two Greek words
 - **Anthropos** - human being/mankind
 - **Logos** - reason/study/science
- Therefore it is **reason about humans** or the study or science of humankind or humanity
- Unlike other disciplines Anthropology is the **study of people—their origins, their development, and contemporary variations**, wherever and whenever they have been found
- **man** has **two important characteristics: biological and cultural** which are **inseparable elements**
- It is dedicated to the comparative study of **humans as a group**
- **anthropology** is a **science** which
 - **Investigates the strategies for living** that are **learned and shared by people** as members of human social groups
 - Examines the **characteristics** that **human beings share** as members of one species (*homo sapiens*) and the **diverse ways** that people **live in different environments**

- Analyses the **products of social groups** -material objects (**material cultures**) and **non-material creations** (religion/beliefs, social values, institutions, practices, etc)
- tries to achieve an **understanding** of **culture**, **society** and **humanity** through detailed studies of community life, supplemented by comparison
- Its **ultimate goal** is to **develop** an integrated picture of **humankind**
- anthropology primarily offers **two kinds of insight**
 1. produces **knowledge** about the actual biological and cultural variations in the world
 2. offers **methods** and **theoretical perspectives** enabling the practitioner to **explore**, **compare**, **understand** and **solve** these **varied expressions** of the human condition

1.1.2 The Historical Development of Anthropology

- anthropology is a **fairly recent discipline**
- has important forerunners in the historiography, geography, travel writing, philosophy and jurisprudence of earlier times
- considered as the **science of humanity**
- **originated** in three or four '**Western**' countries: **France**, **Great Britain**, the **USA** and, until the Second World War, **Germany**
- Historically speaking, this **is a European discipline**
- has its **roots in** the works and ideas of the great **ancient** and **Medieval** Greek, Roman, and Hebrew **philosophers** and **social thinkers**
- as an **academic discipline** was born during the **19th century**, **out of** the intellectual atmosphere of **Enlightenment**: eighteenth century social philosophical movement
- the late **1870s**, anthropology was beginning to **emerge as a profession**

- major **impetus for its growth** was the **expansion of western colonial powers** and their consequent **desire to better understand the peoples living under colonial domination**
- Early anthropologists mainly studied small communities in **technologically simple societies: traditional, non-industrialized**
- In **Ethiopia**, professional anthropologists have been studying culture and society on a more intensive level **only since** the late **1950s**

1.1.3 Scope and subject matter of anthropology

- The breadth and depth of anthropology is immense: covers the past, the present and even the future
- covers **all aspects of human ways of life experiences and existence**, as humans live in a social group
- anthropology studies **humanity** with its all aspects of **existence**, and in its all means of differences (**diversity**) and similarities (**commonality**)
- crucial part of the anthropological project consists in conceptualizing and understanding similarities between social systems and human relationships
- try to understand both connections **within societies** and connections **between societies**
- Anthropologists strive for an understanding of the biological and cultural origins and evolutionary development of the species
- **concerned with all humans, both past and present: their behavior patterns, thought systems, material possessions.**
- in the broadest sense, anthropology aims to describe **what it means to be human**

1.2 Sub-fields of anthropology

- anthropology has often categorized into **four major subfields:**

1) Physical/Biological Anthropology

- Unlike comparative biologists, physical anthropologists study how culture and environment have influenced biological evolution and contemporary variations
 - ✓ Human biology affects/explains some aspects of behavior, society, and culture like marriage patterns, sexual division of labor, gender ideology etc
 - ✓ culture in turn have biological effects like the standards of attractiveness, food preferences, and human sexuality, biological variations such as morphology/structure, color, and size
- major sources of biological variations are derived from the interrelated effects of natural selection, geographical isolation, genetic mutations
- Physical anthropology is essentially concerned with two broad areas of investigation:
 - human evolution
 - study of the gradual processes of simple forms into more differentiated structures in hominid
 - interested in reconstructing the evolutionary record of the human species using fossils/bones
 - divided into specialties
 - 1. Paleoanthropology
 - “paleo” meaning “old”
 - analysis of fossil remains from prehistoric times to determine the missing link that connect modern human with its biological ancestors
 - 2. Primatology

- studies about primates or recent human ancestors
- study the anatomy and social behavior of such non-human primate species as gorillas and chimpanzees

➤ Human genetics

- investigate how and why the physical traits of contemporary human populations vary throughout the world
- examine genetic materials such as DNA and RNA
- genetic studies are crucial in understanding how evolution works and plays important role in identifying the genetic source of some hereditary disease like sickle cell anemia and cystic fibrosis

2) Archaeological Anthropology

- studies the ways of lives of past peoples by excavating and analyzing the material culture/physical remains they left behind

➤ Artefacts

- ✓ material remains made and used by the past peoples
- ✓ can be removed from the site and taken to the laboratory for further analysis
- ✓ Example: Tools, ornaments, arrowheads, coins, and fragments of pottery

➤ Features

- ✓ are like artifacts, are made or modified by past people
- ✓ BUT they cannot be readily carried away from the site

- ✓ Example: house foundations, ancient buildings, fireplaces, steles, and postholes

➤ Eco-facts

- ✓ non- artificial, organic and environmental remains
- ✓ were not made or altered by humans; but were used by them
- ✓ Example: soil, animal bones, and plant remains
- ✓ provide archaeologists with important data concerning the environment and how people used natural resources in the past

- Archaeology has also its own subfields or areas of specialties. The most important ones are

➤ Prehistoric archaeology

- investigates human prehistory and prehistoric cultures
- focuses on entire period between 6,000 years ago and the time of the first stone tools (the first artifacts) around 2.5 million years ago

➤ Historic archaeologists

- reconstruct the cultures of people who used writing and about whom historical documents have been written
- takes advantage of the fact that about 6,000 years ago

3) Linguistic Anthropology

- studies human language as a cultural resource and speaking as a cultural practice in its social and cultural context, across space and time
- focuses on the evolution of languages
- tries to understand languages variation in their structures, units, and grammatical formations

- gives **special attention** to the study of **unwritten languages**
- Language is basically a system of information transmission and reception & a key to explore a culture
- Humans communicate messages by
 - **sound (speech)**
 - **gesture (body language)**
 - other **visual ways** such as writing
- languages hand down **cultural traits** from one generation to another
- language is the most **distinctive feature of being human**
- Linguistic anthropology studies contemporary human languages as well as those of the past
- It is divided into four distinct branches or areas of research:
 - **Structural /Descriptive Linguistics**
 - studies the **structure of linguistic patterns**
 - examines **sound systems, grammatical systems,** and the **meanings** attached to words in specific languages
 - aim to understand the structure and **set of rules** of given language; to compile **dictionaries and grammar books** for previously **unwritten languages**
 - thousands of human languages, at least **structurally all of them are similar** making it possible for everyone of us to grasp and learn languages
 - **Ethno-linguistics (cultural linguistics)**
 - examines the **relationship between language and culture**
 - explore how different linguistic categories can affect how people **categorize their experiences,**

how they think, and how they perceive the world around them

➤ Historical linguistics

- deals with the emergence of language in general and how specific languages have diverged over time
- focuses on comparison and classifications of different languages to differentiate the historical links between them

➤ Socio-linguistics

- investigates linguistic variation within a given language
- No language is a homogeneous system
- reason for variation is geography
- Linguistic variation also is expressed in the bilingualism of ethnic groups

4) Socio-Cultural Anthropology

- the largest sub-fields of anthropology
- deals with human society and culture
- describes, analyzes, interprets, and explains social, cultural and material life of contemporary human societies
- engage in two aspects of study

➤ Ethnography

- ✓ based on field work
- ✓ provides a comprehensive account of a particular community, society, or culture
- ✓ detailed descriptions (ethnographies) are the result of extensive field studies (usually a year or two, in duration)
- ✓ anthropologist observes, talks to, and lives with the people he or she is studying

➤ Ethnology

- ✓ based on cross-cultural comparison, Uses data collected by a series of researchers
- ✓ comparative study of contemporary cultures and societies
- ✓ examines, interprets, analyzes, and compares the results of ethnography the data gathered in different societies
- ✓ ethnologists attempt to identify and explain cultural differences and similarities, to test hypotheses, and to build theory to enhance our understanding of how social and cultural systems work
- ✓ primary objective of ethnology is to uncover general cultural principles, the “rules” that govern human behavior.
- ✓ It is usually synthetic
- sub-divided into many other specialized fields as: Anthropology of Art, Medical Anthropology, Urban Anthropology, Economic Anthropology etc

1.3 Unique (Basic) Features of Anthropology

- characteristics that identify anthropology from other discipline
 - a broad scope
 - ✓ Anthropology is the broad study of human kind, around the world and throughout time
 - its approach
 - ✓ anthropology is holistic, relativistic, and focused
 - Holistic: it looks any phenomena from different vantage points
 - considers culture, history, language and biology essential to a complete understanding of society

- **relativity**: is highly appreciated in anthropological studies
 - tries to study and **explain** a certain belief, practice or institution of a group of people in **its own context**
 - does not make value judgment
- Focusing more on the local than the big social processes has been another exclusive approach in the discipline
 - Pay **great attention to local or micro-social processes** certainly help us to better understand big changes in societies
- ✓ Anthropology's **comparative perspective** helps to understand **differences and similarities across time and place**
- ✓ Considers **insiders' views**: how people **perceive themselves and understand their world**
 - This is what anthropologists call **emic perspective**
 - the logic and justification behind group behavior and cultural practices
- ✓ **highly dependent on qualitative research** to understand the meaning behind any human activity
- ✓ **Extended fieldwork, participant observation, in-depth and key informant interviews and focus-group discussion** are qualitative research instruments

1.4 Misconceptions about anthropology

- **Misconception 1: anthropology is limited to the study of "primitive" societies**

- However, anthropologists nowadays study most advanced and most complex societies as well
- Misconception 2: anthropologists only study the rural people and rural areas
 - But now, anthropologists are also interested in the study of urban people and urban areas. There is a distinct sub-discipline devoted to the study of urban societies called - Urban Anthropology
- Misconception 3: it is wrongly misconceived that anthropology is the study/analysis of fossil evidences of the proto-humans
 - doesn't mean that anthropology is all about the study of human evolution
- Misconception 4: It is misconceived that the purpose of anthropology is to study in order to keep and preserve communities far from development and obsolete cultural practices in museums
 - Rather, anthropologists' duties are to support those communities' capacity to empower themselves in development processes
 - assist peoples' initiatives instead of imposed policies and ideas

1.5 The Relationship between Anthropology and Other Disciplines

- similar with other social sciences such as sociology, psychology, political sciences, economics, history, etc
- greatly overlaps with these disciplines that study human society
- differs from other social sciences and the humanities by its
 - broad scope
 - ✓ anthropology studies humankind in its entirety

- **unique approach**
 - ✓ approach, anthropology studies and analyzes human ways of life **holistically**, **comparatively** and in a **relativistic manner**
- **perspective**
 - ✓ The perspective is **fundamentally empirical**, **naturalistic** and **ideographic** [particularizing] than **nomothetic** [universalizing] one
- **method of research**
 - ✓ it is unique in that it **undertakes extended fieldwork**
 - ✓ develops **intimate knowledge** of the life and social worlds of **its study group/society**
- **unit of analysis**

1.6 The Contributions of anthropology

- Anthropology has **established** for itself the **task of examining all aspects of humanity for all periods of time and for all parts of the globe**
- its contributions are immense. By studying anthropology, we get the following benefits
 - the **anthropological perspective**
 - ✓ its emphasis on the comparative study of cultures, should lead us to the conclusion that:
 - **our culture is just one way of life among many found in the world** and that it represents one way (among many possible ways) to adapt to a particular set of environmental conditions
 - Through the process of contrasting and comparing, we gain a fuller understanding of other cultures and our own
 - **gives us an insight into different ways and modes of life of human society** (social and cultural diversity)

- helps to understand the logic and justification behind group behavior and cultural practices
- let us know how our everyday decisions are influencing others in a multitude of ways and how others' decisions are also influencing ours
- cultural anthropology offers a unique perspective on how local cultural groups are engaging with the process of globalization
- Because of its relativistic approach, anthropology helps us to be more sensitive to and appreciative of cultural diversity and variability
- helps us fight against prejudice and discriminations. It helps us fight against **ethnocentrism**: the belief that one's own culture and one's own way of life is superior to others cultural, social and material life, arises from ignorance about other ethnic groups and their ways of lives
- used as a tool for development. Paying attention to local conditions, is crucial to solve community problems
- In general, anthropology is able to suggest sound solutions to all things human E.g areas of Environmental Change, Health and Nutrition, Globalization, Social Justice etc

END OF CHAPTER 1

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