GENERAL SCOPE AND USES OF
PHYSICAL/BIOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Course name : Advanced Social and Cultural
Anthropology

Paper No. : B.A./B.Sc. Anthropology 6th
semester

Topic No. : 18/22

Title : CONCEPTS USED IN INDIAN
ANTHROPOLOGY: Sacred Complex,
Great and Little Tradition,
Caste-Tribe Continuum
Objective:

The objectives of this module are:
* to give a better understanding of the concepts and theoretical models used by Indian anthropologists in the study of Indian civilization.
* to give an insight into the beginning of an anthropological approach to study places of pilgrimage as civilisational centres.
* to understand the religious aspect of the tribe.
* to see how the great and little traditions interact in the peasant community.

Content & Script of the Programme

Introduction:

Indian anthropology owes its origin to the Asiatic Society of Bengal and anthropologists viz. Roy (1922), Dube (1962), Bose (1963), Majumdar (1950, 1956) and Vidyarthi (1966, 1978) attempted to classify the course of development in terms of the dominant trends in anthropological investigation. Majumdar divided the
anthropological researches into three phases- the Formulatory (1774-1911), Constructive (1912-1937) and Critical (1936-onwards). However, Vidyarthi preferred to call the third phase as Analytical period.

It was during the Analytical period that researches on tribes, castes, villages, urban cities of both orthogenetic and heterogenetic natures were attempted by the Indian anthropologists who were trained in American and European Universities. It is in these studies that concepts of sacred complex, great and little traditions, caste-tribe continuum etc. have been used.

**SACRED COMPLEX:**

The concept of sacred complex as a focus of anthropological investigation was put forth by L.P.Vidyarthi (1961) in his book, *The sacred complex in Hindu Gaya*. Vidyarthi, a follower of the Chicago School of thought, tried to analyze the contribution and importance of traditional centers of Indian
civilisation in a systematic way. With the study of sacred and traditional Hindu Gaya, the concept of sacred complex came to light in anthropological literature. Marriot also developed the concepts of “network and centres” (1958) to study the channels of integration of Indian civilization wherein they discussed the similar theme conceptually. Since then, the concepts of “sacred complex” and “networks and centres” have become very popular theoretical models for studying the traditional places of pilgrimage and the religious complex of the simple societies in India as dimensions of Indian civilisation.

A sacred complex is an intricate and interdependent grouping of sacred centers, sacred performances and sacred specialists. Methodologically, the study of sacred complex unfolds channels of cultural transmission which helps in the integration of civilisation. It has played an integrating role by providing a meeting place of different kinds of people and traditions, of castes and sects, of classes and statuses. It also cultivates and
promotes varieties of creative arts and literature and helps preserve the ‘ideal types’. It is a reality that binds us together against the geographical diversities and social and linguistic heterogeneties. The mechanism of sacred complex and the institution of pilgrimage are dependable and effective means of integration.

Vidyarthi studied the sacred and great traditional Hindu Gaya and described three analytical concepts in detail: i. A sacred geography ii. A set of sacred performances iii. A group of sacred specialists. These three concepts conceived collectively are termed as sacred complex. Apart from the study of Gaya, Vidyarthi undertook short trips to sacred places like Benaras (Varanasi), Bhubaneshwar, Puri, Deoghar and paid many visits to many rural temples and bathing centers. His study has opened up new interest among some other social anthropologists to take up the study of similar towns like Varanasi, Puri, Deoghar, Raj Grihi and Janakpur. The Sacred Complex in Janakpur was studied intensively by M. Jha in 1971. His study brought into light that the boundary of a nation is not always the boundary of a civilization.
These studies attempt to fill the gap in the study of traditional and sacred towns of Indian civilization. Methodologically, the study of sacred complex of a Hindu place of pilgrimage also unfolds in addition to many other matters of theoretical importance, channels of geographical and ecological obstacles.

**GREAT AND LITTLE TRADITION:**

The concepts of Great Tradition and Little Tradition were put forth by Redfield in his “The Social Organisation of Tradition”. He states that in order to comprehend peasant culture, we must understand that it is not an autonomous unit but it is an aspect or dimension of the civilisation of which it is a part. That is why he calls the peasant society as part-society and part-culture. In order to maintain itself, a peasant culture requires continual communication with the local community of thought originating outside of it. The intellectual and often the religious and moral life of the
peasant village is perpetually incomplete; the student needs also to know what goes on in the minds of remote teachers, priests or philosophers whose thinking perhaps is affected by the peasantry. Seen as a ‘synchronic’ system, the peasant culture cannot be fully understood from what goes on in the minds of the villagers alone. Second, the peasant village invites us to attend to the long course of interaction between that community and centers of civilisation. The peasant culture has an evident history; we are called upon to study that history; and the history is not local: it is a history of the civilisation of which the village culture is one local expression. The difference between great tradition and little tradition within a civilization as conceptualized by Redfield may be tabulated as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Great Tradition</th>
<th>Little Tradition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Of the reflective few.</td>
<td>Of the largely unreflective many.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultivated in schools and temples.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Of the philosopher, theologian and literary man.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Consciously cultivated and handed down.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The elites who uphold it are directed by the Vedic tradition that chose different intellectual and ethical emphases.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
In a civilisation, there is a great tradition of the reflective few, and there is a little tradition of the largely unreflective many. The great tradition is cultivated in schools or temples; the little tradition works itself out and keeps itself going in the lives of the unlettered in their village communities. The tradition of the philosopher, theologian, and literary man is a tradition consciously cultivated and handed down; that of the little people is for the most part taken for granted and not submitted to much scrutiny or considered refinement or improvement.

The two traditions are interdependent. Great tradition and little tradition have long affected each other and continue to do so. Great epics have arisen out of elements of traditional tale-telling by many people, and epics have returned again to the peasantry for modification and incorporation into local cultures. Redfield feels that it is in India that the Great
tradition (Sanskritic) is in contrast, various and conspicuous interaction with the life of the local communities. It is there that the teachings of reflective and civilized minds appear plainly in the festivals, rituals and in the ideals of the peasantry. It is in India that a man’s ascribed status, in the form of caste, is closely associated with the claim of that caste to participation in the rituals and ideals of life as inculcated in Sanskritic teaching.

Milton Singer has, in his *When a Great Tradition Modernizes*, focussed on Redfield’s concepts and their application in Indian contexts. While McKim Marriot discussed mainly the application of the concepts of Great Tradition and Little Tradition to the field of religion, Singer has applied to not only religion but also to agriculture and kinship. We know that in fact Redfield composed his concepts on the basis of the peasant society whose primary occupation is theory as a structure of communities of different scales of complexity and of different pre-civilized folk societies through agricultural and urban revolutions. These
transformations created many new social and cultural types within the societal structure of “primary civilisations”, including the peasantry. The early development probably differentiated the cultural traditions into the “higher” levels cultivated in special centres by the educated and uneducated in the villages and towns. Encounters of primary civilizations with the alien pre-civilized or civilized cultures were in some cases traumatic and disastrous, in others a stimulus to a “secondary” phase of growth and development. The outcome in each case depends both on the character of the encounter and on the character of the civilization. The study of such encounters is advanced through detailed study of the institutions, specialists, and media of which a civilization makes use for the transmission of cultural traditions, internally and externally (that is, the social growth of tradition).

When an anthropologist studies an isolated primitive community, the context is that community and its local and immediate culture. When he comes to study a peasant community and its culture, the context is widened to include the elements of the great tradition.
that are or have been in interaction with what is local and immediate. If he is interested in the transformations that take place through this interaction (diachronic studies), he will investigate the communication of little and great traditions with each other and the changes that may have resulted or come to result in one or both because of the communication.

Western anthropologists like McKim Marriot have tried to study the Indian peasant villages as they lie within Hindu, Moslem, or modern Western civilization. In the village called Kishan Garhi which Marriot studied, the religion consists of elements of local culture and elements of the high Sanskrit tradition in close adjustment and integration. He finds “evidences of accretion and of transmutation in form without apparent replacement and without rationalization of the accumulated and
transformed elements”. Fifteen of nineteen festivals celebrated in Kishan Garhi are sanctioned in universal Sanskrit texts. But some of the local festivals have no place in Sanskrit teaching; those that do are but a small part of the entire corpus of festivals sanctioned by Sanskrit literature; villagers confuse or choose between various classical meanings for their festivals; and even the most Sanskritic of the local festivals have obviously taken on elements of ritual that arose, not out of the great tradition, but out of the local peasant life.

CASTE-TRIBE CONTINUUM:

The gradual process through which a tribal group transforms itself into a caste group is designated as the Tribe-Caste Continuum. The concept of “continuum” owes its origin to Redfield when he published *The Folk Culture of Yucatan* (1941). There are several characteristics that are common to tribes and castes and there are several characteristics
that differentiate them from one another. In Indian anthropology, the problem of tribe-caste continuum has attracted the attention of Indian ethnographers and census commissioners since the last decade of the 19th century. Many census commissioners of India faced the difficulties in deciding where the category of “tribe” ended and “caste” began. Risley pointed out (1891,1915) that it was difficult to “draw a demarcating line between tribe and caste”. He has mentioned four processes by which the transformation of tribes into castes is effected. The processes are:

i. The leading men of an aboriginal tribe, having somehow got on in the world and become independent landed proprietors, manage to enrol themselves in one of the more distinguished castes. They usually set up as Rajputs, their first step being to ‘rope in a Brahman priest who invents for them a pedigree hitherto unknown’;

ii. A number of aborigines embrace the tenets of a Hindu religious sect, losing thereby their tribal name;
iii. A whole tribe of aborigines or a large section of a tribe enrol themselves in the ranks of Hinduism, under the name of a new caste which, though claiming an origin of remote antiquity, is readily distinguished by its name;

iv. A whole tribe of aborigines, or a section thereof, become gradually converted to Hinduism without abandoning their tribal designation.

F.G. Bailey (1960, 61), however, presented a more systematic interactional mode for considering the position of the tribe vis-a-vis caste as two ideal poles in a linear continuum. He argued that whereas the tribe is typically organised on the basis of segmentary solidarity, the caste system is based on organic solidarity (Bailey; ibid).

While trying to assess the similarities and dissimilarities between a tribe and a caste and the various factors leading to the tribe-caste continuum, endogamy appears to be the chief characteristic feature that is common between a tribe and a caste. The modern development in the means of transport and
communication has induced increased contact between members of various tribes and has weakened the laws of endogamy in both. According to Max Weber, when an Indian tribe loses its territorial significance, it assumes the form of an Indian caste. In this way, the tribe is a local group whereas the caste is a social group. The caste originated, in ancient Hindu society, with a view to division of labour on the basis of profession and occupation. The tribe came about because of the evolution of community feeling in a group inhabiting a definite geographical area. It may be emphasized here that tribes are different from castes insofar as the former represent self-sufficient economic units, whereas the latter are only sub-units within a wider economic structure. According to D.N. Majumdar, the tribe looks upon Hindu ritualism as foreign and extra-religious even though indulging in it and in the worship of gods and goddesses, whereas for the caste these are necessary parts of religion. The tribes of Madhya Bharat which are called Hindu and Kshatriya tribes are better acquainted with their own “bonga” than with the Hindu
gods. There is greater consciousness of differences in status and rank in the caste than in the tribe. The caste is not a political association whereas the tribe is a political association. The names of clans in castes are adopted from some saint or mythical savant. In the tribe, the clans are based on totemic names which are in turn the names of animals, plants or natural objects and phenomena. In the caste, individuals generally pursue their definite occupations because they are stipulated in the caste system. In the tribe, individuals indulge in all kinds of work, productive and non-productive. Although there are several such differences between a tribe and a caste, there has been a gradual and silent change from tribe to caste.

The high castes and the tribes are at two opposite ends of the Indian social structure; the intermediate rungs are filled by a large number of castes which have either progressed from the tribal stage or have fallen from a previous higher status by non-observance of customary rites and practices, by inter-marriages forbidden by the caste code, by adopting new occupations and novel customs and by eating forbidden food. These intermediary
castes are functionally similar to an industrial middle-class. The maximum number of recruits is in the lowest rung of caste groups from tribes.

As the tribals enter into the caste hierarchy their attitude towards life undergoes significant modification. The importance of the blood bond or the kinship group is forced to the background; the common economy of the clan is superseded by the individual desire for gain and property; money assumes an importance unknown in tribal society; and the ties of moral obligation, duty and reciprocity give way to a nexus based on economic gain and self-interest. Older values are lost; the choice of leader and spouse is guided by newly acquired values. The tribal elders are pushed to the background, the priests are required to satisfy a more exacting clientele, and public opinion finds excuses for failures and new behaviour patterns. Individuality becomes a virtue and a desire for social equality is manifested. The clan chief and sacerdotal head lose their importance and power. New
customs find favour with the people and new prescriptions for their old maladies gain popularity with astonishing success.

**Conclusion:**

The researches of Robert Redfield, Milton Singer and McKim Marriot in India gave theoretical and methodological leads in understanding the folk and peasant communities in India as dimensions of Indian civilization. L.P. Vidyarthi tried to analyze the contribution and importance of traditional centers of Indian civilization in a systematic way. He described three analytical concepts like a sacred geography, a set of sacred performances and a group of sacred specialists which he collectively termed as sacred complex. Marriot and Bernard S. Cohn developed the concepts of “networks and Centres” to study the channels of integration of Indian civilization wherein they discussed the similar theme conceptually. Thus, in Indian anthropology, the concepts of “sacred
complex” and “networks and centres” have become very popular theoretical models for studying the traditional cities and places of pilgrimage as a dimension of Indian civilization. The great and little traditions of India are being reinterpreted and their studies provide a new perspective to understanding Indian civilization. It led to the beginning of an anthropological approach to the study of civilization by studying great and little communities of various dimensions. Great tradition and little tradition have long affected each other and continue to do so thus effecting a constant process of universalization and parochialization. The gradual process through which a tribal group transforms itself into a caste group is designated as the Tribe-Caste Continuum and the concept of “continuum” owes its origin to Robert Redfield. Despite distinct differences between a tribe and a caste, a gradual and silent change from tribe to caste is taking place and such change is effected when a tribe enters the Hindu society by adopting the clan and name of a caste. Culture contact Hindu castes leads to the adoption by the tribe of Hindu beliefs, rituals, customs and to participation in Hindu festivals and attendance at Hindu temples. Their
attitude towards life undergoes significant modification as they enter into the caste hierarchy.