Fundamental in socio-cultural Anthropology
(GENERAL SCOPE AND USE OF SOCIAL-CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY)

Introduction:
Social anthropology is one of the branches of anthropology. It deals with the social and cultural aspects of mankind.

Evans-Pritchard (1995) mentions, “Social anthropology has quite a different task to perform. It studies social behavior, generally in institutionalized forms, such as the family, kinship systems, political organization, legal procedures, religious cults, and the like, and the relations between such institutions; and it studies them either in contemporaneous societies or in historical societies for which there is adequate information of the kind to make such studies feasible.

Further he mentions that the people who live in any society may be unaware, or dimly aware that it has a structure. It is the task of the social anthropologists to reveal it. A total social structure, i.e. to say the entire structure of a given society, is composed of a number of subsidiary structures or systems, and we may speak of its kinship system, its economic system, its religious system and its political system.

Definition and the areas of study for social anthropology as given by some eminent anthropologists are listed here.

Social anthropology is called the natural science of society (Radcliffe-Brown: 1952). This discipline of anthropology involves the comparative study of social systems. Social systems are the independent activities, institutions and values by which people live. It is the job of anthropologists to identify the components of social systems and analyze their interdependence.

In his classical book, An Introduction to Social Anthropology (1952, Vol. I), Ralph Peddington pointed that “Social anthropologists study the cultures of contemporary primitive communities”.

In Encyclopedia Britannica (Vol. XX), Social anthropology is defined as “one of the social sciences engaged in the comparative study of human societies”.

Raymond Firth, a British anthropologist (1951) says, “One of the broadest way of describing social anthropology is to say that it studies human process comparatively”.

Among the Indian anthropologists, S.C. Dube and M.N. Srinivas have given very plausible definitions of social anthropology. S.C. Dube in his book Anthropology (1952) says, “Social anthropology is that part of cultural anthropology, which devotes its primary attention to the study of social structure and religion rather than material aspect of culture”. M.N. Srinivas points out in a paper (Sociological Bulletin, Vol. I, No. I, 1952) that it is a comparative study of human societies. Ideally it includes all societies – primitive, civilized and historic.
From the above discussions about the definition of social anthropology, one may conclude that it studies different societies specially ‘simple society’ and the networks of their social relations. But, among the anthropologists, there are different concepts about the use of name of this very branch of anthropology. Some prefer to use the name ‘social’ anthropology while some want to use ‘cultural’ anthropology.

**Social and Cultural anthropology:**

Social anthropology is the outcome of the impact of the “Durkheimian School of Thought” followed by the British anthropology whereas cultural anthropology in the contemporary situation refers to the Americanisation of this discipline.

In the beginning the French sociologist, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) had a decisive influence on the development of social anthropology. Following the principles of Durkheim, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955) developed social anthropology in England. In the development of social anthropology, the Polish born and English-trained Bronislaw Malinowski’s (1884-1942) works and publications are very important.

In India, as anthropology has evolved under the shadow of British colonialism, it adopted the term social anthropology. But, since the past five decades, precisely speaking since early fifties, interaction between Indian and American anthropologists increased substantially. And so, the academic canvas was greatly influenced by both schools. Gopal Saran (1983) rightly points out ‘it is neither feasible nor desirable to make a sharp distinction between social anthropology and cultural anthropology’. Hence, it will be better to use the term social-cultural anthropology.

Claude Levi-Strauss (1963) states that cultural anthropology and social anthropology are like two books which include the same chapters though the latter may be arranged in different order and the number of pages in each may vary. Nevertheless, he points out certain finer distinctions. Social anthropology developed out of the discovery that all aspects of social life – economic, technical, political, legal, esthetic and religious – make up a significant complex and that none of these aspects can be understood unless it is considered together with all the others. It, therefore, tends to work from the whole to the parts, or, at least, to give the former logical precedence over the latter. A technique does not merely have a use: it also fulfills a function, and a function, if it is to be properly understood, infers sociological and not only historical, geographical, mechanical, or physio-chemical considerations. The complex of functions, in turn, brings in a new notion, that of structure, and the importance attributed to the idea of social structure in contemporary anthropological research is well known.

Cultural anthropology has an entirely different path. Instead of the static view of the whole social group as a sort of system or constellation, the question of dynamics – of how culture is handed on from generation to generation – was to lead cultural anthropology to exactly the same conclusion, i.e., that the system of interconnections among all aspects of social life plays a more important part in the transmission of culture than any one of those aspects considered separately. In this way, the “culture and personality” studies were to be limited with the “social structure” studies giving back to Radcliffe-Brown and, through him to Durkheim. Whether anthropology is described as ‘cultural’ or ‘social’, its object always is to discover the whole man, as reveal in the one case through his works and in the other through his representations.
Further, social anthropology is largely ‘synchronic’ in approach (denoting the study of societies and cultures at a given point of time) while cultural anthropology encompasses ‘diachronic’ approach (denoting the study of societies and culture through time).

**Ethnography and Ethnology in Anthropology:**

Social-cultural anthropology is the study of human society and culture, the subfield that describes, analyses interprets and explains social and cultural similarities and differences. To study and interpret socio-cultural diversity, the anthropologists engage in two kinds of activity: ethnography (based on field work) and ethnology (based on cross cultural comparison).

Ethnography provides an account of a particular community, society or culture but the focus is usually on small-scale ones. During ethnographic field work, the ethnographer gathers data that he or she organizes, describes, analyses and interprets to build and present the account in the form of book, article or film.

The style that dominated ‘classic’ ethnographers was ‘ethnographic realism’. The writers base their account mainly on first hand knowledge. They derive their authority – both as scientists and as voices of the “native” or the “other” – from the personal research experience.

Ethnology examines, interprets, analyses and compares the results of ethnography and the data gathered in different societies. And, the ethnologists explain cultural differences and similarities, to test hypothesis and to build theory to enhance socio-cultural system.

Levi-Strauss (1963) takes ethnography, ethnology and anthropology as the three stages or three moments of time in the same line of investigation. Ethnography corresponds to the first stage in research – observation and description, and field work. Ethnology represents a first step towards synthesis. Without excluding direct observation, it leads toward conclusions sufficiently comprehensive to preclude, or almost to preclude, their being based solely on first-hand information. He mentions three kinds of synthesis, geographical information about neighbouring groups is to be collated; historical, if the purpose is to reconstruct the past of one or several people; systematic, if one type of technique, custom, or institution is selected for special attention. On the other hand, social anthropology or cultural anthropology is linked to a second and final stage of the synthesis, based upon ethnographical and ethnological conclusions.

**Why do Anthropologists Study Primitive People?**

Lucy Mair (1965) says, “… this is awkward, because the peoples to whom most of our research has been directed are coming to resent any description that seems to allot them an inferior status. A word that has been much used is primitive.”

Some anthropologists write such societies as ‘societies of simple technology’, but this is a clumsy phrase if it must be often repeated. But ‘simple’ can be used if it is understood that this is what it means. An adjective small-scale, denoting the narrow range of social relationships is also used for such societies. People sometimes speak of a face-to-face society, a term which implies that all members of the society are in contact, or at least known, to one another. This would describe only the smallest of the social units that anthropologists are concerned with.
The word ‘primitive’ in the sense in which it has become established in anthropological literature does not mean that these societies are either earlier in time or inferior to other kinds of societies. Even though such societies are less developed than ‘developed societies’ in some respects they are often more developed and complex in others. This being so, the word was perhaps an unfortunate choice, but it has now been too widely accepted as a technical term to be avoided.

For various reasons primitive societies have long held the attention of anthropologists. They provided important clues in the search for the origin of institutions. Anthropologists were interested in them because they displayed institutions in their simplest forms and that it is sound method to proceed from examination of the more simple to examination of the more complex.

The functional social anthropologists study social institutions as interdependent part of social systems. It is more advantageous to study those societies which are structurally so simple, and culturally so homogeneous, that they can directly observe as a whole, before attempting to study complex societies where this is not possible.

Another reason for studying primitive societies at the present time is that they are being rapidly transformed and must be studied soon or never. These vanishing social systems are unique structural variations, a study of which aids us very considerably in understanding the nature of human society.

The study of primitive societies also has intrinsic value. They have their own interest and perception of the way of life, the values and the beliefs to live in their physical environment with minimum requirements of technological comfort.

The anthropologists, therefore, feel it an obligation to make a systematic study of as many of these primitive societies as they can while there is still an opportunity to do so.

**Value in the Late Academic-Emergence of this Discipline:**

John Beattie (1964) writes, “It is only quite recently in human history that it has come to be fairly widely – though by no means universally – accepted that all human beings are fundamentally alike; that they share the same basic interests, and so have certain common obligations to one another simply as people. This belief is either explicit or implicit in most of the great world religions, but by no means acceptable today to many people even in ‘advanced’ societies, and it would make no sense at all in many of the less developed cultures”.

One of the main reason for the slow growth of anthropology was the lack of the Europeans to recognize the similarities of ‘remotely-located’ societies. When human diversity was accepted as ‘natural’ it opened the doors for formal studies.

It is interesting to know that the earliest anthropologists like Tylor, Morgan, Spencer, Boas, etc., were by and large ‘Armchair anthropologists’ who were basing their conclusions on the secondary data and secondary sources of the so called ‘exotic’ and ‘strange’ people inhabiting the remotest of areas. That is why the common man and even the intellectual class had considered the anthropologists as ‘eccentrics’.
The first academic position in anthropology was held by Edward Tylor at Oxford in 1884. The Jessup North Pacific Expedition led by Franz Boas in 1897 and the Cambridge Expedition to the Torres Straits in 1898-99 comprising Haddon, Rivers, Seligman and others mark the beginning of formal anthropological field work. Malinowski, the great British social anthropologist of Polish origin transformed the field work in anthropology.

In this way the nineteenth century anthropologists studied the oddities out of pure interest in them and not to reform the world or to earn a living. Consequently a sense of detachment and a tradition of relative objectivity have become the distinctive attributes of anthropology. During the first quarter of the 20th century, anthropology started blossoming into a full-fledged academic discipline. Gradually it became a mature discipline that study all about men and his work.

Uniqueness of Social Anthropology:

The uniqueness of this discipline lies in the following approaches and themes.

Holism: Holism or the multi-faceted approach is the attempt to study the whole picture and to apply knowledge from many different fields to understand any aspect of behaviour. Traditionally, individual anthropologists tried to be holistic. It regards social life as a system of which all the aspects are organically connected.

Cultural Relativism: For an objective study an anthropologist should possess the sense of neutrality. He avoids ethnocentrism and prefers the idea of cultural relativism. Cultural relativism is the principle that all cultural patterns are equally valid and the behaviour of one culture should not be judged by the standards of another culture.

Cross-Cultural Comparison: Anthropologists have always been concerned to study the infinite cultural heterogeneity. The anthropologists adopt cross-cultural comparison also known as comparative method for their study.

Two major types of cross-cultural studies are ‘descriptive-analytical’ and ‘correlational’.

A descriptive-analytical cross-cultural study involves comparison of two or more cultures (societies). Margaret Mead’s Sex and Treatment or Ruth Benedict’s Pattern of Culture can be cited as examples of such study.

A correlational cross-cultural study employs statistical measures to determine the degree of relationship between the cultural traits or institutions of societies. Murdock gave correlational cross-cultural comparison a distinctive colour in his Social Structure.

Field Work: A distinctive feature of anthropology is its emphasis on the field work for obtaining data. Observation has always been the basis of any systematic and scientific study. In addition, objectivity in the study is also to be maintained.
Anthropologist considers ‘participant observation’ as one of the most important technique for collecting data. Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) lived among the natives of the Trobriand Islands during World War I. He immersed himself in the language and customs of the natives in order to view the world from their perspective and to better understand their culture. This practice is known as participant observation in anthropological field work.

Regarding the objectivity, Levi-Strauss (op. cit) writes, “The objectivity aimed at by anthropology is on higher level: The observer must not only place himself above the values accepted by his own society or group, but must adopt certain definite methods of thought; he must reason on the basis of concepts which are valid not merely for an honest and objective observer, but for all possible observers. Thus anthropologist does not simply set aside his own feelings; he creates new mental categories and helps to introduce notions of space and time, opposition and contradiction, which are foreign to traditional thought as the concepts meet with today in certain branches of natural sciences”.

**Uses of Social Anthropology:**

Anthropology is useful to understand human beings. It helps to avoid misunderstanding between people. If we can understand why other groups of people are different from ourselves, we might have less reason to condemn them for behaviour that appears strange to us. Anthropology can reduce ethnocentrism by instilling an appreciation of cultural diversity.

Social anthropology play public service role. It can indeed be ‘applied’. It can be used to identify and solve social problems. Applied anthropologists work for NGOs, ethnic associations, and business.

Among the domain of applied anthropology are educational, urban, medical and business anthropology. These domains have theoretical as well as applied dimensions. Conrad Philip Kottak (2000) briefly describes these domains as follows.

Educational anthropologists work in classrooms, homes, neighbourhoods, and other settings relevant to education. Their applied research leads to policy recommendations.

Urban anthropologists study city life and urbanization. Rural social forms affect urban adjustment. They pay attention to such forms and to urban social units as they propose, design and implement social policy for cities.

Medical anthropologists study disease and health care cross-culturally. Cultures differ in their notion about what causes illness.

For business, key aspect of anthropology include ethnography and observation as ways of gathering data, cross-cultural expertise and a focus on cultural diversity.

Anthropology’s comparative outlook, long-standing third world focus, and cultural relativism offer background for overseas work in the continents such as North America.
Kottak (*ibid*) mentions about three different positions of applied anthropology – using it to identify and solve social problems. He writes, “People who hold the ivory tower view contend that anthropologists should avoid practical matters and concentrate on research, publication and teaching. Those who favour what Ralph Peddington (1970) has called the schizoid view think that anthropologists should carry out, but not make or criticize, policy. In this view, personal ‘value judgments’ should be kept strictly separate from scientific investigation. The third view is advocacy. Its proponents assert that precisely because anthropologists are experts on human problems and social change and because they study, understand and respect cultural values, they should make policy affecting people. In this view, proper roles for applied anthropologists include (1) identifying needs for change that local people perceive, (2) working with those people to design culturally appropriate and socially sensitive change, and (3) protecting local people from harmful development schemes.”

**Conclusion:**

Social anthropology is one of the main branches of the subject anthropology. For certain reasons it will be better to use the term social cultural anthropology for this discipline. It deals with the study of social and cultural aspects of all kinds of society through time and space though the early anthropologists took their interest in studying what so called ‘primitive’ societies. They study, analyze and interpret different societies cross-culturally. For this they study empirically using standard field work techniques.

They reduce the ethnocentrism and have a firm belief on cultural relativism. This can bring to identify and solve social problems. Anthropologists are experts on human problems and social change and because they study, understand and respect cultural values, they should make policy affecting people.