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### **Postmodernism in Anthropology: Theory, Debates, Contemporary Developments and Indian Perspectives**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper critically examines the emergence, evolution and contemporary relevance of postmodernism in anthropology, with particular emphasis on its engagement within Indian anthropology and its implications for understanding contemporary global transformations. The paper traces the intellectual foundations of postmodern anthropology through critiques of ethnographic authority, objectivity, representation and bounded notions of culture, drawing upon the works of scholars such as Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, George E. Marcus, Michel Foucault, Edward Said and others associated with postmodern and post-structural thought. It explores how the “crisis of representation” transformed anthropology’s understanding of ethnography, reflexivity, positionality and cultural interpretation.

The paper further examines how Indian anthropology engaged with these debates through the works of Nirmal Kumar Bose, M. N. Srinivas, Andre Béteille, Yogendra Singh, Veena Das and Subaltern Studies scholars, arguing that Indian anthropology evolved through a distinctive interaction between colonial knowledge systems, caste, tribe, nationalism, development and democratic politics. The discussion demonstrates that while Indian anthropology absorbed postmodern critiques of authority and representation, it largely retained a strong commitment to empirical depth, ethical engagement and public relevance.

Moving beyond the classical postmodern moment, the paper analyses contemporary developments in anthropology relating to globalization, digital transformation, decoloniality, climate anthropology, political economy, environmental conflict and public anthropology. It argues that anthropology today increasingly engages with questions surrounding artificial intelligence, platform capitalism, ecological crisis, indigenous knowledge, localization, migration and governance while remaining attentive to lived experience and everyday social worlds.

The paper also critically examines the limitations of postmodern anthropology, including concerns regarding excessive relativism, overemphasis on textuality and insufficient engagement with material inequality, labour exploitation and political economy. It argues that contemporary anthropology has gradually moved toward a more balanced position that combines reflexivity, empirical rigour, ethical responsibility and interdisciplinary engagement.

The paper concludes that postmodernism fundamentally transformed anthropology by making it more historically conscious, ethically self-aware and attentive to unequal structures of knowledge production. Far

from weakening the discipline, these debates expanded anthropology's intellectual horizons and strengthened its relevance for understanding rapidly changing societies shaped by globalization, ecological crisis, technological transformation and persistent social inequality. In the contemporary world, anthropology remains uniquely positioned to connect large structural transformations with the lived realities of communities, identities, memories and human relationships.

**Keywords:** Postmodernism; Anthropology; Ethnography; Reflexivity; Representation; Indian Anthropology; Colonial Anthropology; Decoloniality; Globalization; Political Economy; Digital Anthropology; Climate Anthropology; Environmental Justice; Indigenous Knowledge; Subaltern Studies; Public Anthropology; Ontological Turn; Localization; Culture; Modernity; Political Society; Ecology; Technology and Society.

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## Introduction

Few intellectual developments have shaken anthropology as deeply as postmodernism. It forced the discipline to pause and look inward. Anthropology, which had spent decades studying cultures, communities and societies across the world, suddenly found itself becoming the object of its own scrutiny. Anthropologists began questioning the assumptions that had long guided their discipline: Can human societies really be described objectively? Is ethnography a scientific representation of reality, or is it also shaped by language, power and politics? Who has the authority to speak for another culture? Can any anthropologist ever stand outside the world they are studying?

These questions became especially important during the second half of the twentieth century. Colonial empires were collapsing, postcolonial societies were asserting their identities, feminist scholarship was questioning male-dominated knowledge systems, indigenous communities were challenging the way they had been represented, and broader intellectual movements in philosophy and literary theory were destabilizing ideas of universal truth.

Postmodernism emerged within this atmosphere of intellectual uncertainty and political transformation. It did not simply attack anthropology. Rather, it compelled anthropology to become more reflexive, ethically aware and intellectually humble. It challenged the discipline's claims to neutrality and exposed the hidden power relations involved in producing knowledge about "others."

At the same time, postmodernism also generated anxiety. Some anthropologists worried that excessive scepticism would weaken anthropology's ability to produce meaningful knowledge. Others feared that the discipline might become trapped in endless textual criticism while neglecting real issues such as poverty, inequality, violence and displacement.

The debate therefore became far richer than a simple acceptance or rejection of postmodernism. Over time, anthropology absorbed many postmodern insights while also moving beyond some of its limitations. Today, contemporary anthropology continues to carry strong postmodern influences through reflexive ethnography, decolonial anthropology, feminist anthropology, multispecies ethnography, digital anthropology and collaborative research approaches.

In India, these debates acquired additional layers of complexity. Indian anthropology evolved within a colonial and postcolonial context marked by caste, tribe, religion, nationalism, development and democratic politics. Indian anthropologists were often studying communities within their own social world rather than distant

colonial “others.” As a result, Indian anthropology engaged with postmodernism selectively and critically.

The present paper examines the emergence, evolution and continuing relevance of postmodernism in anthropology. It traces the intellectual foundations of postmodern thought, discusses major global and Indian scholars, examines contemporary developments in anthropology after the classical postmodern moment, and reflects on the discipline’s future in an increasingly unequal and interconnected world.

## **PART I**

### **FOUNDATIONS OF POSTMODERNISM IN ANTHROPOLOGY**

#### **Classical Anthropology and the Construction of Ethnographic Authority**

Anthropology emerged as a modern academic discipline during the expansion of European colonialism, industrial capitalism and Enlightenment rationality. Its development cannot be separated from the wider historical processes through which Europe attempted to classify, govern and intellectually order the non-European world. The nineteenth century was marked by extraordinary confidence in science, progress and reason. European powers increasingly viewed themselves as representatives of civilization, while the peoples of Asia, Africa, Oceania and the Americas were often imagined as occupying earlier stages of human development.

Anthropology grew within this intellectual climate. The discipline became part of a larger project through which Europe sought not merely to conquer territories, but also to understand, classify and manage populations. Colonial administrators, missionaries, travellers, linguists and ethnographers collectively contributed to the production of knowledge about colonized societies. Anthropology therefore did not emerge in isolation from empire; rather, it developed alongside colonial governance and often benefited from the political and institutional structures created by imperial expansion.

Early anthropologists such as Lewis Henry Morgan and Edward Burnett Tylor reflected this nineteenth-century evolutionary imagination. Morgan’s work on kinship and social evolution attempted to arrange human societies along a unilinear path moving from savagery to barbarism and finally to civilization. Tylor similarly viewed culture as a universal human capacity that evolved progressively over time. Although these scholars made important contributions by arguing that all human societies possessed culture and rationality, their frameworks remained deeply hierarchical. European modernity implicitly became the measure against which all societies were judged.

This intellectual orientation had significant consequences. Tribal and indigenous societies frequently appeared in anthropological writings not as contemporary societies living within dynamic historical conditions, but as survivals of humanity’s past. Anthropology thus created what Johannes Fabian later described as the “denial of coevalness” — the tendency to place non-Western peoples in another historical time, even while they inhabited the same modern world as the anthropologist. The “primitive” became less a living contemporary subject and more an object through which Europe imagined its own civilizational superiority.

At the same time, classical anthropology should not be dismissed simplistically as merely an instrument of

colonial domination. The discipline also produced important intellectual ruptures. Anthropologists challenged racial determinism, emphasized cultural relativism and demonstrated that human societies could not be understood solely through European categories. Franz Boas, for example, powerfully criticized scientific racism and argued that cultures must be understood within their own historical and environmental contexts. His students, including Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, further destabilized assumptions regarding gender, personality and social norms in Western society.

Yet even these more liberal traditions of anthropology often retained asymmetries of representation. The anthropologist still occupied the position of interpreter, translator and authoritative narrator.

The most decisive methodological transformation in anthropology came through Bronisław Malinowski. His fieldwork among the Trobriand Islanders fundamentally reshaped anthropological method. Malinowski insisted that anthropologists must leave their verandas, live among the people they studied, learn the local language and immerse themselves in everyday life. Participant observation became anthropology's defining methodological identity.

Malinowski's contribution cannot be overstated. He moved anthropology away from speculative theorizing toward intensive empirical fieldwork. He argued that institutions should be understood in relation to the functions they perform within society. His ethnographies conveyed remarkable detail regarding exchange systems, kinship, ritual and social organization.

However, later anthropologists would also identify important limitations within Malinowski's work. Despite the intimacy of his field immersion, the ethnographic voice remained strongly authoritative. The anthropologist still appeared capable of comprehensively interpreting another society. Moreover, Malinowski's published ethnographies often portrayed Trobriand society as internally coherent and relatively timeless, even though colonial trade, missionary influence and wider political transformations were already affecting island life.

Ironically, the publication of Malinowski's personal diaries after his death further complicated anthropology's understanding of fieldwork. The diaries revealed frustration, prejudice, loneliness and emotional tensions that had remained absent from his polished ethnographic texts. This became extremely important for later postmodern anthropology because it exposed the gap between the messy realities of fieldwork and the authoritative certainty of ethnographic writing.

A. R. Radcliffe-Brown similarly strengthened anthropology through structural-functional analysis. He viewed societies as systems whose institutions contributed to maintaining social equilibrium. Social structures, kinship systems and ritual practices were interpreted in terms of their integrative functions.

Structural-functionalism brought analytical sophistication and comparative rigour to anthropology. Yet it also encouraged a tendency to treat societies as stable, bounded and internally integrated systems. Conflict, contradiction, colonial disruption and historical change often remained marginal within such analyses.

This tendency became particularly visible in the famous ethnographies of African societies produced during British colonial rule. Works such as Evans-Pritchard's studies of the Nuer and Meyer Fortes' analyses of kinship systems provided extraordinarily rich ethnographic detail, but they often portrayed societies as relatively self-contained social worlds. Colonialism itself frequently remained in the background despite profoundly shaping the conditions under which these societies existed.

Postmodern anthropologists later argued that this absence was not accidental. Anthropology's authority partly depended upon constructing cultures as coherent objects of knowledge. Ethnographic writing often transformed fluid and contested realities into orderly cultural systems.

The issue therefore was not merely factual incompleteness. It was epistemological. Anthropology increasingly appeared to operate through what James Clifford later called "ethnographic authority" — the capacity of the anthropologist to present interpretations as if they transparently reflected reality itself.

This authority rested on several assumptions:

- that cultures could be bounded and described;
- that fieldwork produced privileged access to truth;
- that the anthropologist could stand outside the society being studied;
- and that ethnographic writing could objectively represent another culture.

Postmodern anthropology would challenge each of these assumptions systematically.

The critique became sharper because anthropology's relationship with colonialism could no longer be ignored. By the 1960s and 1970s, anti-colonial scholarship increasingly exposed how colonial knowledge systems classified and governed subject populations. Anthropologists began confronting uncomfortable questions regarding their discipline's historical complicity with empire.

Talal Asad played an especially important role here. In *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, Asad argued that anthropology's methods, categories and institutional development were deeply shaped by colonial conditions. Colonial power was not merely an external backdrop to anthropological research; it was constitutive of the discipline itself. Anthropological knowledge therefore could not claim political innocence.

This realization marked a major turning point. Anthropology was no longer simply studying "other cultures." It was beginning to examine its own historical foundations.

### **Philosophical and Intellectual Origins of Postmodernism**

The emergence of postmodernism within anthropology cannot be understood without locating it within broader intellectual transformations occurring across philosophy, literary criticism, history and social theory during the twentieth century. Postmodern anthropology did not arise suddenly from within the discipline itself. Rather, anthropology absorbed and reworked a series of wider critiques directed against Enlightenment rationality, universal truth claims and the authority of modern knowledge systems.

One of the earliest intellectual influences was Friedrich Nietzsche, whose critique of truth and morality destabilized foundational assumptions of Western thought. Nietzsche argued that truths are not timeless universal realities waiting to be discovered; rather, they are historically produced interpretations shaped by perspective, power and human desire. This attack on objective certainty deeply influenced later post-structural and postmodern thinkers.

Anthropology absorbed this intellectual shift gradually. Earlier anthropologists had often assumed that scientific fieldwork could produce objective cultural knowledge. Nietzsche's philosophical legacy complicated this assumption by suggesting that interpretation itself is inseparable from the observer's position.

The work of Michel Foucault became especially transformative for anthropology. Foucault fundamentally altered how scholars understood the relationship between knowledge and power. In works such as *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, he argued that modern institutions — prisons, schools, hospitals, bureaucracies and states — produce systems of knowledge that regulate and discipline human populations.

Power, for Foucault, does not operate only through visible coercion. It also operates through classification, normalization and expert knowledge. This insight profoundly influenced anthropology because it encouraged anthropologists to ask whether ethnographic knowledge itself participated in broader structures of power.

Anthropologists increasingly began recognizing that categories such as tribe, race, tradition and primitive society were not neutral descriptions. They were historically produced classifications tied to colonial administration and modern governance.

Foucault also challenged conventional understandings of history. Instead of viewing history as linear progress, he emphasized ruptures, discontinuities and shifting regimes of truth. This weakened anthropology's earlier confidence in grand evolutionary narratives.

Jacques Derrida further destabilized assumptions regarding language and meaning. Derrida's method of deconstruction argued that texts do not contain fixed meanings. Meanings are always unstable because language itself operates through difference, ambiguity and interpretation.

For anthropology, this insight had radical implications. Ethnographies could no longer be treated as transparent windows into another culture. They were texts shaped by narrative strategies, translation, omission and rhetorical authority.

Anthropologists increasingly recognized that ethnographic writing involves selection and construction. The ethnographer decides:

- whose voices to include,
- what events matter,
- how concepts are translated,
- and what overall coherence is imposed upon social life.

This realization became foundational to postmodern anthropology.

Jean-François Lyotard further contributed to postmodern thought through his critique of "metanarratives." He argued that modernity had been sustained by large explanatory stories — progress, reason, emancipation, science and development — that claimed universal validity. Postmodernism represented scepticism toward such universal narratives.

Anthropology absorbed this scepticism through its growing distrust of totalizing theories. Structural-functionalism, modernization theory and even certain forms of Marxism increasingly appeared inadequate for capturing the complexity, fragmentation and historical contingency of social life.

Perhaps no work influenced anthropology more directly than Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Said demonstrated how Western scholarship historically constructed "the Orient" as exotic, irrational, feminine and backward. Knowledge about non-Western societies was deeply entangled with imperial power.

Anthropology found itself directly implicated in this critique because ethnographic writing had often produced similar representations of tribal and non-Western societies.

Said's intervention was crucial because it shifted attention from whether anthropological representations were factually accurate to how representation itself operates politically. Even sympathetic representations may reproduce unequal power relations if the West continues to speak for and define the non-West.

Anthropology therefore entered what came to be known as a "crisis of representation." The issue was no longer simply methodological. It became profoundly epistemological and ethical.

### **Clifford Geertz and Interpretive Anthropology: The Bridge to Postmodernism**

Clifford Geertz occupies a unique and transitional position within twentieth-century anthropology. Although Geertz never fully embraced postmodernism, his work decisively weakened anthropology's earlier positivist ambitions and opened intellectual pathways that later postmodern anthropologists would deepen and radicalize.

Geertz rejected the idea that culture could be studied through universal scientific laws similar to those found in the natural sciences. In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, he famously described culture as "webs of significance" spun by human beings themselves. Anthropology, therefore, was not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive science in search of meaning.

This shift was profound. Earlier anthropological traditions had often attempted to identify underlying structures, functions or evolutionary stages governing human societies. Geertz instead emphasized interpretation, symbolism and meaning.

His concept of "thick description" became one of the most influential methodological ideas in modern anthropology. Borrowing from philosopher Gilbert Ryle, Geertz argued that human actions cannot be understood merely by observing behaviour externally. Meaning depends upon context.

A wink, for example, may appear physically identical to an eye twitch, yet socially it may signify irony, conspiracy, humour, flirtation or parody. Anthropology's task therefore is not simply to record behaviour but to interpret the layers of meaning embedded within social action.

This interpretive orientation fundamentally changed ethnography. Anthropologists increasingly focused on symbols, rituals, performances and systems of meaning rather than treating societies as mechanical structures.

Geertz's work on Balinese cockfights illustrates this approach beautifully. Rather than viewing cockfighting merely as gambling or entertainment, Geertz interpreted it as a symbolic dramatization of status, masculinity and social rivalry within Balinese society. The ethnographer thus became an interpreter of cultural texts.

Yet Geertz's contribution went beyond symbolism. He also destabilized anthropology's claims to objectivity. If ethnography is interpretive, then anthropological knowledge is necessarily shaped by the anthropologist's own acts of reading and interpretation.

At the same time, Geertz did not embrace radical relativism. He continued to believe that disciplined interpretation remained possible through careful fieldwork and contextual understanding. His anthropology

retained methodological seriousness even while abandoning positivist certainty.

This balance explains why Geertz became such a crucial bridge between classical anthropology and postmodern critique.

Later postmodern anthropologists such as James Clifford and George Marcus would push Geertz's insights further by arguing that ethnographies are not merely interpretations of culture; they are literary and political constructions shaped by power and representation.

Nevertheless, Geertz had already transformed the terrain of anthropology. He shifted the discipline away from the search for universal laws and toward interpretive understanding. In doing so, he helped create the intellectual conditions within which postmodern anthropology could emerge.

## **PART II**

### **THE POSTMODERN TURN**

#### **Writing Culture and the Crisis of Representation**

The postmodern turn in anthropology acquired its clearest and most influential expression with the publication of *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* in 1986, edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus. The importance of this volume lies not merely in the fact that it questioned anthropology's writing practices, but in the deeper challenge it posed to the entire authority structure of ethnographic knowledge. It asked anthropology to look carefully at what it had often taken for granted: that fieldwork automatically produced truth, that the anthropologist's presence in the field guaranteed authenticity, and that ethnographic writing could transparently represent another way of life.

Until this moment, ethnography had generally been treated as the final outcome of fieldwork, as though the anthropologist first collected facts in the field and then wrote them down in a disciplined and scholarly manner. *Writing Culture* unsettled this assumption by showing that ethnography is not a simple transfer of reality into text. It is a constructed account. The anthropologist selects certain events, foregrounds some voices, excludes others, translates local terms into academic language, arranges experiences into chapters, and gives social life a narrative order that may not exist in the same form in lived reality. This does not mean that ethnography is false, but it does mean that ethnography is never innocent.

James Clifford's idea of ethnographies as "partial truths" remains one of the most powerful phrases to emerge from this debate. The phrase was not meant to dismiss anthropology as fiction. Rather, it reminded the discipline that every ethnographic account is partial because it is written from a particular location, shaped by a particular encounter, addressed to a particular audience, and produced within particular political and institutional conditions. No ethnographer, however sincere, can capture the full truth of another society. What is produced is always a situated interpretation.

This realization created what came to be known as the "crisis of representation." Anthropology had long claimed to represent cultures, but postmodern critics asked how such representation was made possible and at what cost. When an anthropologist wrote about "the Nuer," "the Balinese," "the Azande," "the Trobriander",

or “the tribes of India,” what happened to internal differences, dissenting voices, gendered experiences, political conflicts and historical change? How did one scholarly voice acquire the authority to speak for an entire people?

The crisis became sharper because ethnography had historically developed within unequal global relations. Many classic anthropologists came from powerful imperial or Western institutions and studied communities located in colonized or formerly colonized societies. Even when the anthropologist was personally sympathetic, the institutional structure of knowledge production remained unequal. The anthropologist usually had access to universities, publishers, grants, archives and academic recognition, while the people being studied often remained unnamed, translated and interpreted through someone else’s authority.

This is why *Writing Culture* was not merely about style. It was about power. Its subtitle, “The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography,” captured this dual concern. “Poetics” referred to the literary and narrative devices through which ethnographies are written. “Politics” referred to the larger power relations within which such writing becomes authoritative. The postmodern turn therefore did not simply ask anthropologists to write better; it asked them to examine the moral and political consequences of writing about others.

The significance of this critique becomes clearer if we look back at classical anthropology. Malinowski’s authority came partly from his claim of having “been there.” Long-term fieldwork became the foundation of ethnographic legitimacy. But postmodern anthropology asked whether being there was enough. Presence in the field does not automatically guarantee understanding. The anthropologist may live in a community for years, but the final account is still shaped by translation, interpretation, positionality and writing. The field does not speak by itself; it is made to speak through ethnography.

This also forced anthropology to confront its colonial entanglements more directly. Colonial states had used categories such as tribe, caste, race, custom and tradition to govern populations. Ethnographic classifications often entered administrative practice, census operations, legal codes and development policy. Anthropology could no longer pretend that its categories were merely descriptive. They had consequences. A group classified as a tribe, primitive society, backward community or customary population could be governed differently because of that classification.

In this sense, the postmodern critique did something extremely important for anthropology. It shifted attention from the study of culture as an object to the study of representation as a process. The question was no longer only “What is the culture of this community?” It became equally important to ask: Who is describing this culture? In what language? For what audience? With what authority? Under what political conditions? And with what consequences for the people being represented?

For a serious anthropological paper, this is the central point to retain: postmodernism did not make anthropology weaker by questioning ethnographic authority; it made anthropology more responsible by forcing it to understand that representation itself is an ethical act.

### **Reflexivity and Positionality**

One of the most enduring contributions of postmodern anthropology is the insistence on reflexivity. In simple terms, reflexivity means that the anthropologist must examine their own position within the research process. The researcher is not a camera silently recording reality. The researcher is a social being who enters the field with a body, a language, a gender, a nationality, a class background, a caste location, an institutional affiliation,

a set of assumptions and a history of personal experiences. All these shape what the researcher sees, hears, asks, understands and eventually writes.

Earlier ethnographies often made the anthropologist disappear from the text. The reader encountered detailed accounts of kinship, ritual, religion, economy and political organization, but very little about how the anthropologist gained access, how people responded to them, what tensions emerged, what was not understood, and how the final interpretation was produced. The ethnographer appeared as an invisible and neutral observer. Postmodern anthropology challenged this invisibility and argued that it was itself a form of authority.

Renato Rosaldo's work was especially influential in deepening this discussion. In *Culture and Truth*, Rosaldo questioned the older ideal of the detached observer. He argued that emotions, biography and personal experience may shape understanding in powerful ways. This was not an argument for careless subjectivity. Rather, it was an argument against false neutrality. Rosaldo showed that certain forms of human experience, such as grief, rage, loss or fear, may not be understood adequately through detached observation alone. The anthropologist's own life may sometimes open interpretive possibilities that were previously unavailable.

This insight widened anthropology's understanding of knowledge. Fieldwork is not merely a technical method; it is an encounter between persons. The anthropologist is observed by the community just as the community is observed by the anthropologist. Trust, suspicion, curiosity, hospitality, distance, intimacy and misunderstanding all shape the production of ethnographic knowledge.

In the Indian context, this issue becomes even more complex. M. N. Srinivas had already recognized that the observer and the observed are not separated by a clean methodological boundary. In a caste society, the researcher's caste identity, perceived status, language, education and urban location can shape field interactions deeply. A researcher may be welcomed in some homes but not others, told certain things by dominant groups but denied access to subaltern perspectives, or unconsciously reproduce the assumptions of the social world from which they come.

This is why reflexivity in Indian anthropology cannot be treated as an imported postmodern fashion. It is a methodological necessity. A Brahmin researcher studying Dalit life, an urban middle-class scholar studying Adivasi communities, a male anthropologist studying women's experiences, or an English-speaking academic studying rural labour cannot assume neutrality merely because they follow fieldwork procedures. Their position will shape access, silence, speech and interpretation.

At the same time, reflexivity must be handled carefully. Its purpose is not to make the anthropologist the central character of the ethnography. A poorly used reflexive style can become self-indulgent, turning the suffering or struggles of communities into a background for the researcher's own intellectual journey. The stronger use of reflexivity is different. It makes the research process transparent. It helps the reader understand how knowledge was produced, what limitations shaped it, and how the anthropologist's position affected interpretation.

This is where postmodern anthropology offers a valuable discipline of humility. It does not ask the anthropologist to abandon truth. It asks the anthropologist to state more honestly the conditions under which truth claims are made. In this sense, reflexivity is not the enemy of rigour. It is part of rigour.

A serious anthropology of the present, especially in unequal societies like India, must therefore combine

empirical seriousness with positional honesty. Without empirical seriousness, anthropology becomes impressionistic. Without positional honesty, it becomes falsely authoritative.

### **Language, Narrative and Ethnographic Writing**

Postmodern anthropology drew attention to something anthropology had long underplayed: ethnography is writing. This may sound obvious, but its implications are profound. Ethnographic writing is not a neutral container into which field data is poured. It is an active process through which social reality is organized, interpreted and made meaningful for readers.

Anthropologists work through language at every stage of research. They listen, translate, classify, compare, interpret and narrate. Local words may not have exact equivalents in English or other academic languages. Ritual acts may carry meanings that cannot be captured by literal translation. Silence, gesture, humour, memory and emotion may resist easy representation. Yet the anthropologist must eventually produce a written account, and in that act, field experience is transformed into text.

Postmodern anthropology asked us to examine this transformation carefully. What happens when oral narratives become written quotations? What happens when a fluid conversation becomes “data”? What happens when a complex life is summarized as an example of a cultural pattern? What happens when local categories are translated into terms such as kinship, religion, economy, custom or tradition?

These questions matter because translation is never purely technical. It is interpretive and political. When an anthropologist translates a local institution as “custom,” it may appear old and static. When it is translated as “law,” it may appear formal and authoritative. When a community’s ecological practice is called “belief,” it may appear less rational than scientific knowledge. Words carry power.

This is particularly important in the study of tribal and indigenous communities. Colonial and postcolonial ethnographies have often translated living practices into categories such as primitive religion, animism, superstition, custom, folklore or tradition. Such terms are not innocent. They shape how wider society imagines these communities. They may also influence policy, education, law and development interventions.

Postmodern anthropology therefore encouraged experimentation with ethnographic form. Some anthropologists began using dialogic writing, where conversations and multiple voices were retained rather than absorbed into a single authorial interpretation. Others explored collaborative ethnography, where communities participated more directly in shaping the research account. Life histories, oral narratives, autobiographical fragments and polyphonic writing became ways of challenging the single authoritative voice of the anthropologist.

However, these experiments also created new challenges. A text with many voices may still be edited and arranged by the anthropologist. Collaboration may still occur within unequal institutional conditions. The community may speak, but the academic still controls publication, theoretical framing and professional recognition. Postmodern anthropology therefore cannot be satisfied merely by including more quotations from local people. The deeper issue is whether the structure of knowledge production itself changes.

This is why the question of ethnographic writing remains so important. It is not enough to say that we must “give voice” to people. Communities already have voices. The real question is whether anthropology has the capacity to listen, translate and represent without appropriating or flattening those voices.

In a mature anthropological practice, writing must become accountable. It must reveal complexity rather than simplify it. It must avoid presenting communities as culturally uniform. It must allow contradiction, disagreement and historical movement to remain visible. It must also acknowledge that any written account is a crafted representation, not the final truth of a people.

This does not reduce the value of ethnography. On the contrary, it makes ethnography more ethically serious. The best ethnographic writing does not pretend to be a mirror. It acts more like a carefully held conversation between field realities, theoretical reflection and moral responsibility.

### **Critique of the Concept of Culture**

The postmodern critique of culture is perhaps one of the most consequential debates in anthropology. For much of its history, anthropology relied on culture as its central concept. Culture helped anthropologists challenge biological racism and ethnocentric judgments. It allowed them to argue that human practices must be understood within their own meaningful worlds. In this sense, the culture concept was liberating. It protected difference from being dismissed as irrational or inferior.

Yet postmodern anthropologists showed that the same concept could also become limiting. When culture is treated as a bounded and coherent whole, it can freeze people into categories. It may suggest that all members of a community think alike, live alike and believe alike. It may hide internal differences of gender, class, caste, age, power and political interest. It may also make social practices appear timeless, even when they are products of historical change.

Lila Abu-Lughod's essay "Writing Against Culture" became especially influential in this debate. Her concern was not that anthropologists should stop studying meaning, identity or social life. Her concern was that the word "culture" often creates distance between "us" and "them." When we say, "their culture," we may unintentionally produce people as different, bounded and explainable through tradition. Culture then becomes a container in which people are trapped.

This critique is highly relevant in discussions of tribal communities, religious minorities and rural populations. Phrases such as "tribal culture," "Muslim culture," "Indian culture" or "village culture" may appear harmless, but they often conceal enormous internal diversity. No tribal community is only tribal. Its members may also be farmers, wage labourers, migrants, students, political workers, forest users, Christians, Hindus, Sarna followers, women leaders, youth activists, government employees, mobile phone users and ecological knowledge holders. To reduce them to "tribal culture" is to miss the complexity of their contemporary life.

Similarly, "Muslim culture" or "Hindu culture" cannot be treated as homogeneous wholes. Gender, region, class, caste, sect, language and political history shape religious life differently. A postmodern anthropological approach does not deny culture; it refuses to treat culture as a sealed box.

In India, this critique carries special importance because colonial and postcolonial governance have often relied on cultural classification. Communities are frequently described through administrative categories such as Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled Caste, Other Backward Class, minority, forest-dwelling community or primitive tribal group. These categories may be necessary for rights, recognition and affirmative action, but they also risk simplifying lived realities. Anthropology must therefore remain alert to the difference between administrative identity and social life.

The critique of culture also helps us rethink development. Development agencies often describe communities in terms of cultural barriers. For instance, poor health outcomes may be attributed to “tribal beliefs,” low school attendance to “traditional attitudes,” or women’s limited mobility to “cultural restrictions.” Such explanations may contain partial truth, but they can easily become lazy explanations if they ignore poverty, state failure, distance, discrimination, language barriers, poor infrastructure and historical marginalization.

A stronger anthropology would ask a different set of questions. Is culture really the cause, or is culture being used as a convenient explanation for structural neglect? Are people refusing services because of tradition, or because services are humiliating, inaccessible, unreliable or culturally insensitive? Are communities backward, or have they been repeatedly excluded from institutions that claim to modernize them?

This is where postmodern critique becomes practically useful. It prevents anthropology and development practice from turning culture into blame. It reminds us that people live within histories, institutions and power relations, not merely within traditions.

At the same time, it is important not to move to the opposite extreme. Culture remains important. People do act through inherited meanings, moral worlds, rituals, kinship obligations, ecological memories and symbolic systems. The challenge is not to abandon culture, but to treat it as dynamic, contested and historically situated.

A mature anthropological position would therefore say: culture matters deeply, but it never explains everything by itself. Culture must be understood in relation to power, economy, history, state institutions, gender relations, ecological change and human agency.

This is perhaps one of the most valuable lessons of postmodern anthropology. It teaches us to respect cultural difference without imprisoning people inside cultural stereotypes. It asks us to write about communities as living, changing and thinking collectivises rather than as museum-like representatives of tradition.

### **Analytical Synthesis: What the Postmodern Turn Changed**

The postmodern turn changed anthropology at several levels at once. It changed how anthropologists understood fieldwork, how they wrote ethnography, how they used the concept of culture, and how they thought about their own authority. Its importance lies precisely in this layered transformation.

At the methodological level, it made anthropology more reflexive. The researcher could no longer pretend to be invisible. Fieldwork became understood as an encounter shaped by social location and power.

At the textual level, it made anthropology more attentive to writing. Ethnography came to be seen not simply as reporting but as representation.

At the ethical level, it made anthropology more responsible. Writing about others became a moral act with consequences.

At the political level, it exposed anthropology’s historical connection with colonial power and administrative classification.

At the conceptual level, it destabilized the idea of culture as bounded, stable and homogeneous.

But the postmodern turn also produced tensions that must be acknowledged. If all ethnographies are partial, how does anthropology make credible claims? If all representation involves power, should anthropologists stop representing others? If culture is always contested, can we still speak meaningfully about cultural patterns? These questions did not destroy anthropology, but they forced it to become more careful.

The best answer is not to abandon ethnography, but to practice it with greater humility, transparency and accountability. Anthropology must continue to interpret social life, but it must do so while acknowledging its own limits. It must continue to write about communities, but without pretending to fully possess their truth. It must continue using culture as a concept, but only after freeing it from rigidity and stereotype.

This is where postmodernism's lasting value lies. It did not end anthropology's search for understanding. It made that search more honest.

### **PART III**

## **INDIAN ANTHROPOLOGY AND POSTMODERN ENGAGEMENTS**

### **Indian Anthropology and the Distinctiveness of the Indian Experience**

The encounter between Indian anthropology and postmodernism unfolded differently from the trajectory witnessed in Europe or North America. In the West, postmodernism emerged largely through the "crisis of representation" within anthropology and broader philosophical critiques of Enlightenment rationality. In India, however, anthropology had always existed within a far more layered social and historical reality marked by colonialism, caste hierarchy, civilizational continuity, nationalism, tribal diversity, linguistic plurality and postcolonial development. As a result, Indian anthropology did not simply import postmodernism as an intellectual fashion. Rather, it engaged with it selectively, critically and often pragmatically.

This difference is important to understand. Classical Western anthropology frequently involved scholars from imperial societies studying geographically distant populations represented as "others." Indian anthropology, in contrast, evolved within a society where the anthropologist and the community being studied often inhabited overlapping cultural worlds. The researcher was rarely a complete outsider. Questions of caste, language, religion, region and political identity complicated the neat separation between observer and observed.

At the same time, Indian anthropology remained deeply tied to practical concerns of governance, nation-building, tribal welfare, social reform and development planning. Indian anthropologists were not merely documenting exotic cultures; many were participating in debates regarding citizenship, democracy, integration, affirmative action, displacement and modernization. Consequently, the Indian engagement with postmodernism remained more cautious than celebratory. Indian scholars recognized the importance of reflexivity and critique of representation, but many also feared that excessive scepticism might weaken anthropology's ability to engage with poverty, inequality, violence and state policy.

This tension produced a distinctive intellectual tradition. Indian anthropology absorbed postmodern insights while retaining a strong commitment to empirical fieldwork, historical depth and public relevance. The result was not a rejection of postmodernism, but a more grounded and socially engaged adaptation of it.

## **Colonial Anthropology in India: Classification, Governance and the Production of Social Categories**

Any serious discussion of Indian anthropology must begin with colonial knowledge systems. Anthropology in India developed within the wider apparatus of British colonial administration, where classification became central to governance. Colonial rulers sought to make Indian society legible through surveys, censuses, gazetteers, ethnographic reports and administrative documentation. Communities were mapped, categorized and ranked in unprecedented ways.

The colonial census operations conducted from the late nineteenth century onward became especially important in shaping anthropological knowledge. Administrators and ethnographers attempted to organize India's immense diversity into fixed categories such as caste, tribe, race, religion and linguistic community. Herbert Risley's work is particularly significant here. Risley attempted to correlate caste with race using anthropometric measurements, arguing that physical features such as nasal index could reveal racial origins. Today such ideas are widely discredited, but they profoundly shaped colonial understandings of Indian society.

The colonial state's desire for classification was not merely intellectual curiosity. Classification was deeply political. Communities that appeared fluid and overlapping in lived reality were increasingly transformed into rigid administrative identities. The categories of "tribe" and "caste," for instance, became bureaucratically codified in ways that often simplified social complexity.

Nicholas Dirks later argued powerfully that colonialism transformed caste into a far more rigid organizing principle than it may previously have been. Colonial administration relied heavily on caste for governance, recruitment, enumeration and legal categorization. In this process, caste became objectified as a fixed social system rather than a historically changing and regionally varied social reality.

Similarly, tribal communities were often represented as isolated populations existing outside mainstream civilization. Colonial anthropology frequently imagined tribes as "primitive survivals" requiring protection, pacification or gradual assimilation. Such representations ignored centuries of interaction between tribal and non-tribal populations through trade, migration, forest use, warfare and political alliances.

This is where postmodern and postcolonial critiques became deeply relevant for Indian anthropology. Scholars increasingly recognized that categories such as tribe, caste and customary community were not simply discovered by colonial anthropology; they were actively produced through systems of knowledge and governance. The issue therefore was not only whether colonial anthropology was accurate or inaccurate. The deeper issue was that colonial ethnography helped create administrative realities that later shaped law, policy and social identity itself.

Bernard Cohn's work on colonial knowledge systems further illuminated this process. Cohn demonstrated how surveys, censuses and ethnographic classification became instruments of colonial rule. Knowledge about Indian society was inseparable from the exercise of administrative power. Anthropology, therefore, could not claim political innocence.

Postmodern anthropology deepened this critique by questioning the authority through which such categories became naturalized. Once a community was classified as "tribal," "criminal," "martial," "backward" or "customary," the category itself acquired institutional life. Such classifications shaped land rights, labour recruitment, educational access, political representation and development policy.

The relevance of this critique continues in contemporary India. Categories such as Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled Caste and Other Backward Class remain central to democratic policy and affirmative action. These categories are politically necessary in many ways, particularly for addressing historical exclusion. Yet anthropology must also remain aware that administrative categories can simplify lived identities. Adivasi communities across India differ enormously in language, ecology, political history and social organization. To collapse them into a singular tribal category risk reproducing the homogenizing tendencies that postmodern anthropology sought to challenge.

This is why the colonial history of anthropology remains foundational to understanding postmodern engagements in India. The critique of representation in India cannot remain abstract or purely textual because classification itself has had material consequences for communities. Anthropology here is inseparable from governance, development and citizenship.

### **Nirmal Kumar Bose and the Ethics of Engaged Anthropology**

Nirmal Kumar Bose occupies a distinctive and morally compelling position in Indian anthropology. Although Bose belonged to an earlier generation and cannot be described as a postmodern anthropologist in any straightforward sense, several elements of his work anticipated concerns that would later become central to postmodern anthropology, particularly questions of ethical engagement, cultural representation and the relationship between anthropological knowledge and public life.

Deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi, Bose rejected the detached posture often associated with colonial anthropology. He believed anthropology should not merely observe Indian society from a distance but should engage with it morally and politically. His anthropological orientation was shaped by empathy, participation and civilizational understanding rather than by the colonial fascination with categorizing “primitive others.”

Bose’s writings on tribal societies are especially important in this regard. Colonial anthropology had often portrayed tribes as isolated populations existing outside Indian civilization. Bose challenged this rigid separation. He argued that tribal communities had long interacted with wider social and cultural processes within the subcontinent. The boundary between “tribal” and “mainstream” was therefore neither absolute nor historically fixed.

This argument was intellectually significant because it destabilized simplistic binaries between civilization and primitiveness. Bose saw Indian society as historically interconnected, with continuous flows of cultural exchange, adaptation and accommodation. In many ways, this anticipated later postmodern critiques of bounded cultures.

Equally important was Bose’s ethical orientation toward anthropology. He did not believe the anthropologist should merely extract information from communities. Anthropology, for Bose, involved responsibility toward the people being studied. His association with Gandhi reinforced his belief that knowledge must remain connected to human dignity and social transformation.

This ethical dimension becomes especially relevant when viewed against later postmodern critiques of representation. Postmodern anthropology argued that ethnographic writing often reproduces unequal power relations between observer and observed. Bose’s work anticipated this concern by insisting that anthropology in India could not remain morally detached from questions of poverty, exclusion and national integration.

His work among tribal communities also demonstrated remarkable sensitivity toward cultural continuity and adaptation. Rather than treating tribal life as static or museum-like, Bose recognized that communities negotiate change through interaction with political, economic and religious forces. This insight later became central to critiques of cultural essentialism within postmodern anthropology.

At the same time, Bose retained a strong belief in anthropology's public role. Unlike some later postmodern positions that became deeply sceptical of all forms of representation, Bose continued to believe that anthropology could contribute meaningfully to national understanding and social reform. This balance between reflexive sensitivity and public engagement remains one of the most valuable aspects of his intellectual legacy.

### **M.N. Srinivas and Reflexive Fieldwork in India**

M. N. Srinivas transformed Indian social anthropology not only through influential concepts such as Sanskritization and dominant caste but also through methodological reflections that anticipated later postmodern concerns regarding reflexivity, positionality and the social location of the researcher.

Srinivas's contribution becomes especially important because he recognized early that fieldwork in India cannot be socially neutral. In a deeply hierarchical society structured by caste, kinship, language and regional identities, the anthropologist enters the field not as an invisible observer but as a socially recognized person. Communities respond to the researcher through existing social categories. The field therefore becomes an interactional space shaped by power, status and perception.

His reflections on "the observer and the observed" anticipated later postmodern anthropology's insistence that the researcher must examine their own position within the process of knowledge production. Srinivas acknowledged that caste identity could influence access, trust and interpretation in profound ways. A researcher from a dominant caste background may receive information differently from a researcher belonging to a marginalized social group. Similarly, urban education, English language fluency and institutional affiliation may create distance between researcher and participants.

This insight was methodologically transformative because it challenged the illusion of detached objectivity. Long before reflexivity became fashionable in Western anthropology, Srinivas had already recognized that ethnographic knowledge emerges through socially situated encounters.

Yet Srinivas differed significantly from later postmodern scepticism in one important respect. He did not believe reflexivity invalidated anthropology's capacity to produce meaningful knowledge. On the contrary, he believed awareness of positionality could strengthen empirical inquiry. Reflexivity, in his work, remained connected to methodological seriousness rather than radical relativism.

Srinivas also transformed Indian anthropology through his conceptual engagement with social change. His concept of Sanskritization demonstrated how lower caste groups adopt practices associated with higher castes to improve social status. This challenged static understandings of caste and highlighted mobility, aspiration and social negotiation within Indian society.

Similarly, his idea of the "dominant caste" revealed that power in rural India cannot be understood purely through ritual hierarchy. Economic resources, political influence and demographic strength also shape local authority structures. These insights helped anthropology move away from overly textual or scriptural

understandings of Indian society toward grounded analyses of lived social relations.

From a postmodern perspective, Srinivas's work is important because it destabilized essentialized categories while retaining empirical depth. He showed that Indian society is dynamic, contested and historically changing. Yet he also insisted that rigorous fieldwork and conceptual clarity remain indispensable.

This balance continues to offer an important corrective today. Contemporary anthropology often risks moving either toward rigid positivism or toward excessive relativism. Srinivas demonstrated the possibility of a middle path in which reflexive awareness coexists with disciplined empirical inquiry.

### **Yogendra Singh and the Idea of Multiple Modernities**

Yogendra Singh played a crucial role in challenging linear theories of modernization that dominated mid-twentieth century social science. Classical modernization theory generally assumed that societies move through predictable stages from tradition to modernity, with Western industrial society representing the ultimate model of progress. Such theories often viewed tradition as an obstacle that modernity would eventually replace.

Yogendra Singh questioned this assumption fundamentally. He argued that Indian modernity does not unfold through the destruction of tradition but through complex interactions between traditional institutions and modern processes. Modernity in India therefore cannot be understood through Western historical experience alone.

This argument aligned strongly with postmodern critiques of universal historical narratives. Singh demonstrated that societies experience modernity differently depending on their historical, cultural and political conditions. Modernity in India is layered, uneven and plural rather than singular and linear.

His work is particularly important because it challenged simplistic binaries between tradition and modernity. In India, democratic politics may coexist with caste networks; digital technology may coexist with ritual life; capitalist markets may coexist with kinship obligations; and constitutional citizenship may coexist with local customary authority.

This perspective becomes especially relevant in tribal and rural studies. Tribal communities are often represented either as untouched traditional populations or as groups gradually entering modernity. Singh's framework allows a more nuanced understanding. Communities do not merely abandon tradition and become modern. Rather, they selectively negotiate institutions, technologies and identities in ways shaped by local histories and social structures.

This insight also has significant implications for development anthropology. Development policy often assumes that modernization requires replacing traditional systems with modern institutions. Singh's work suggests a more complex reality in which communities reinterpret and adapt modernity rather than simply receiving it passively.

From a postmodern perspective, Yogendra Singh's contribution lies in provincializing universal models of development and progress. He showed that there is no single pathway to modernity. Different societies produce different modernities through historically specific negotiations between continuity and change.

## **Veena Das and the Anthropology of Violence, Suffering and Everyday Life**

Among contemporary Indian-origin anthropologists, Veena Das has had one of the deepest global intellectual influences. Her work fundamentally reshaped anthropology's understanding of violence, suffering, memory and the ordinary.

Das's contribution becomes especially important because she moved anthropology beyond spectacular representations of violence. Earlier analyses often treated violence as an extraordinary rupture — riots, wars, massacres or political events that interrupt normal life. Das argued instead that violence frequently enters the texture of everyday existence and continues to shape ordinary relationships, language and subjectivity long after the event itself appears to end.

Her work on Partition violence, anti-Sikh riots and urban suffering demonstrates remarkable ethnographic sensitivity. Rather than reducing people to victims or symbolic figures, she explored how individuals inhabit damaged social worlds through acts of endurance, silence, care and everyday negotiation.

One of her most profound contributions lies in her engagement with language and suffering. Das questioned whether extreme pain can ever be fully represented through anthropological description. Trauma often exceeds ordinary language. Yet anthropology must still attempt to witness and understand it.

This concern resonates strongly with postmodern critiques of representation. Das recognized that ethnography cannot transparently capture another person's suffering. Representation always remains incomplete. Yet unlike some postmodern approaches that became trapped in textual scepticism, Das retained a deep ethical commitment to ethnographic engagement.

Her anthropology therefore combines philosophical sophistication with grounded attention to lived realities. She draws upon Wittgenstein, ordinary language philosophy and phenomenology while remaining deeply attentive to everyday human experience.

Das also transformed anthropology's understanding of the state. Rather than viewing the state only as a distant institution, she showed how state power enters ordinary life through bureaucracy, policing, welfare systems and violence. The state becomes experienced not only through formal law but through intimate encounters, rumours, fear and administrative practices.

This approach has influenced contemporary anthropology globally, especially studies of violence, humanitarianism, public health and urban marginality.

For Indian anthropology, Veena Das represents an especially important intellectual figure because she demonstrates that reflexive and theoretically sophisticated anthropology can remain deeply connected to real human suffering. She prevents postmodern anthropology from collapsing into abstract textualism by grounding it in lived ethical worlds.

## **Andre Béteille and the Critique of Excessive Relativism**

Andre Béteille occupies an extremely important position within debates surrounding postmodernism in India because he represents one of the strongest voices defending empirical rigour, conceptual clarity and disciplined scholarship against what he saw as the dangers of excessive relativism.

Béteille did not reject reflexivity or deny that knowledge is socially situated. He recognized that researchers operate within historical and institutional contexts. However, he remained sceptical of intellectual trends that appeared to dissolve all distinctions between evidence and interpretation.

For Béteille, anthropology and sociology cannot survive without commitment to disciplined inquiry. Concepts such as caste, class, inequality and institution may be imperfect, but abandoning analytical categories altogether would weaken social science rather than liberate it.

His critique of postmodernism was therefore not reactionary. It was methodological and intellectual. He worried that some forms of postmodern thought encouraged obscurity, rhetorical excess and distrust of evidence. If every account becomes merely subjective or discursive, then meaningful comparison and critical evaluation become impossible.

This concern remains highly relevant today. Anthropology certainly needed the postmodern critique of authority and representation, but it also risks losing analytical coherence if all truth claims are treated as equally unstable.

Béteille's work reminds anthropology that reflexivity should strengthen intellectual honesty, not replace empirical seriousness. Anthropology must remain open to critique while continuing to engage carefully with evidence, fieldwork and conceptual analysis.

His position therefore offers an important balance within Indian anthropology. It recognizes the value of postmodern critique without surrendering anthropology's responsibility toward rigorous scholarship.

### **Subaltern Studies, Voice and the Anthropology of Marginal Histories**

The Subaltern Studies movement profoundly influenced Indian anthropology, even though it emerged initially within history rather than anthropology. Scholars such as Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee challenged elite-centered narratives of Indian history and nationalism by foregrounding the experiences, agency and political consciousness of marginalized populations.

Subaltern Studies argued that colonial and nationalist histories alike often erased peasants, tribals, workers and other subordinated groups by treating them merely as passive recipients of elite action. The movement sought to recover histories from below.

This had a deep impact on anthropology because it shifted attention toward:

- everyday resistance,
- fragmented memory,
- local political consciousness,
- oral histories,
- and forms of agency often ignored by formal archives.

Anthropology increasingly began examining how marginalized communities narrate their own histories and interpret their own experiences. Rather than viewing peasants or tribal groups merely as beneficiaries, victims or traditional populations, anthropologists began recognizing them as active historical actors.

Partha Chatterjee further deepened debates on nationalism, democracy and modernity by questioning the assumption that postcolonial societies such as India would naturally evolve along the same institutional and political pathways followed by Western Europe. He argued that the Western idea of “civil society” — built around formally organized citizens, legal equality and stable institutional participation — does not fully capture the realities of countries marked by poverty, informality, social hierarchy and uneven access to state institutions.

In societies like India, large sections of marginalized populations often engage with the state not primarily as formal citizens operating through structured civic institutions, but through everyday negotiations, political mediation, local networks, informal arrangements and collective mobilization around immediate needs such as housing, welfare, identity documents, land rights, livelihoods and access to public services. Chatterjee described this sphere as “political society,” where people may not always fit neatly within idealized notions of modern citizenship, yet actively negotiate with the state in practical and strategic ways.

His work therefore challenged universal Western models of democracy and modernity by showing that postcolonial political life develops through historically specific social realities rather than through a simple imitation of European experiences.

This insight became especially important for anthropology because it redirected attention from abstract institutions toward lived political practices. Democracy in India cannot be understood only through constitutional frameworks; it must also be understood through everyday negotiations between citizens, bureaucracies, local power structures and state institutions.

Subaltern Studies also influenced anthropology’s understanding of archives and silence. Histories are not merely absent; they may be actively excluded from official records. Anthropology therefore increasingly turned toward oral narratives, memory, folklore and embodied histories as legitimate forms of knowledge.

At the same time, Subaltern Studies also faced criticism for becoming overly textual and insufficiently attentive to material political economy. Yet its contribution remains enormous because it fundamentally changed how Indian social sciences think about voice, agency and historical representation.

For anthropology, the most enduring lesson of Subaltern Studies is that marginalized communities are not merely objects of policy or ethnographic description. They are producers of history, meaning and political imagination.

## **PART IV**

### **CONTEMPORARY ANTHROPOLOGY AFTER POSTMODERNISM**

#### **Anthropology after the Classical Postmodern Moment**

By the closing years of the twentieth century, anthropology had entered a new intellectual phase. The intense theoretical battles associated with the postmodern turn had begun to soften, and many scholars started speaking of a period “after postmodernism.” Yet this phrase is often misunderstood. Anthropology did not abandon postmodernism in the sense of rejecting its central insights. Rather, many of those insights became

normalized within the discipline itself. Questions that once appeared radical gradually became part of ordinary anthropological thinking. Few anthropologists today would confidently claim complete objectivity, politically neutral ethnography or culturally bounded societies existing in isolation from wider historical and global processes. The discipline had been permanently altered.

The more important shift was that anthropology increasingly moved away from debating postmodernism as a self-contained theoretical movement and instead began applying postmodern critiques to emerging global realities. Globalization, neoliberal capitalism, climate crisis, digital technology, mass migration, humanitarianism, identity politics, biotechnology and surveillance transformed the world rapidly during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Anthropology responded by expanding its field of inquiry dramatically.

This transition is intellectually significant because it reveals anthropology's remarkable adaptability. Classical anthropology often focused on relatively bounded communities, while postmodern anthropology concentrated heavily on representation, textuality and reflexivity. Contemporary anthropology, however, increasingly combines these concerns with renewed engagement in political economy, technology, ecology, governance and global systems. In many ways, anthropology after postmodernism is neither anti-postmodern nor fully postmodern. It is better understood as a hybrid intellectual space where reflexivity, empirical research, ethical engagement and interdisciplinary inquiry coexist.

Another important development during this period was the growing discomfort with excessively inward-looking theoretical debates. Some critics argued that postmodern anthropology had become trapped within academic discussions regarding texts and representation while remaining insufficiently attentive to material suffering, inequality and political violence. This criticism pushed anthropology toward renewed engagement with the public sphere. Questions of health, migration, climate justice, digital exclusion, indigenous rights and democratic participation became central concerns.

This movement also reflected wider transformations in the world itself. Communities could no longer be studied as isolated social units. Migration connected villages to global labour markets; digital communication linked remote regions with transnational networks; environmental crises transcended national boundaries; and state policies increasingly interacted with global financial institutions, NGOs and development agencies. Anthropology therefore had to rethink not only its theories but also its very understanding of the field.

In India, these changes became particularly visible through rapid urbanization, liberalization of the economy after 1991, expansion of media and digital technologies, environmental conflicts, identity-based mobilization and changing forms of labour migration. Anthropologists increasingly found themselves studying not only villages and tribes but also call centres, software industries, bureaucracy, informal settlements, mining zones, environmental protests, digital communities and transnational migration networks.

Thus, the anthropology that emerged after the classical postmodern moment did not return to older positivist certainties. Instead, it retained postmodern sensitivity toward power, language and representation while simultaneously expanding into new domains shaped by contemporary global transformations.

## **Globalization and Multi-Sited Ethnography**

One of the most significant developments in contemporary anthropology has been the rise of globalization studies and the corresponding transformation of ethnographic method. Classical anthropology often imagined

the field as a geographically bounded community, usually a village, tribe or localized social group. The anthropologist travelled to a relatively contained setting, remained there for an extended period and produced an ethnography centered on that social world.

By the late twentieth century, however, this model increasingly appeared inadequate. Human lives were no longer confined within neat territorial boundaries. Migration, trade, finance, media, tourism, development programs, digital communication and transnational institutions had woven societies into complex global networks. Anthropologists therefore began questioning whether a single village or community could still serve as an isolated field site.

George E. Marcus responded to this challenge through the idea of “multi-sited ethnography.” Rather than studying one bounded location, anthropologists increasingly began following people, objects, ideas and institutions across multiple interconnected sites. Migrant workers, for instance, could not be understood solely within their home villages because their lives were shaped simultaneously by urban labour markets, remittance economies, border regimes and global capitalism. Similarly, commodities such as coffee, minerals, pharmaceuticals or digital devices connected producers, traders, consumers, corporations and regulators across continents.

Multi-sited ethnography therefore represented more than a methodological innovation. It reflected a deeper transformation in anthropology’s understanding of social life. Cultures could no longer be treated as self-contained wholes because communities themselves were increasingly constituted through movement, circulation and transnational connection.

This shift also altered anthropology’s engagement with development and political economy. Earlier ethnographies sometimes risked presenting communities as culturally isolated from broader economic systems. Contemporary anthropology increasingly studies how global financial institutions, multinational corporations, NGOs, climate agreements and digital infrastructures shape local realities.

In India, these transformations became highly visible after economic liberalization. Rural communities became linked to global labour markets through migration to Gulf countries, metropolitan cities and industrial zones. Agricultural practices were reshaped by global commodity chains, corporate seed systems and changing consumption patterns. Mining regions became connected to international extraction economies, while digital platforms transformed labour, communication and political mobilization.

Anthropologists studying contemporary India therefore often work across multiple sites simultaneously: villages, cities, bureaucratic offices, corporate spaces, digital platforms and transnational networks. A study of tribal displacement due to mining, for example, may involve fieldwork among affected communities, state institutions, corporate actors, environmental activists and legal forums. The “field” itself has become dispersed.

This transformation has profound theoretical implications. Anthropology no longer studies isolated cultures encountering modernity from outside. It studies interconnected worlds shaped by unequal flows of capital, information, technology and power. Globalization, however, does not produce uniformity alone. Anthropologists repeatedly demonstrate that global processes are locally interpreted, negotiated and resisted in culturally specific ways.

Thus, contemporary anthropology after postmodernism retains scepticism toward universal narratives while

simultaneously recognizing that communities today exist within deeply interconnected planetary systems.

### **Arjun Appadurai and Global Cultural Flows**

Few scholars transformed anthropological understandings of globalization as profoundly as Arjun Appadurai. His work marked an important intellectual shift because it challenged earlier assumptions that globalization simply spreads Western modernity uniformly across the world. Instead, Appadurai argued that globalization produces complex, uneven and multidirectional flows of culture, media, migration, finance and imagination.

In *Modernity at Large*, Appadurai introduced influential concepts such as ethnoscapescapes, mediascapescapes, technoscapescapes, financescapescapes and ideoscapescapes. These “scapes” represented overlapping and disjunctive global flows through which contemporary life is organized. Migration patterns, digital media, financial capital, technological circulation and political ideologies interact constantly, creating unstable and fragmented cultural worlds.

What made Appadurai’s work especially important for anthropology was his recognition that imagination itself had become a social force. Mass media, cinema, television and later digital platforms transformed how people imagine aspirations, identities and futures. A migrant worker in Bihar, a software engineer in Bengaluru and a tribal youth in Jharkhand may all inhabit worlds shaped simultaneously by local realities and global media imaginaries.

This perspective fundamentally destabilized earlier anthropological notions of culture as territorially bounded. Cultures today are produced through circulation and encounter rather than geographical isolation. Appadurai’s work therefore extended postmodern critiques of fixed identities into the age of globalization.

His contribution is particularly relevant for understanding contemporary India. The expansion of digital technologies, satellite television, social media and migration has transformed even remote rural and tribal regions. Aspirations regarding education, consumption, mobility and citizenship increasingly emerge through interaction with wider media worlds. Yet these aspirations are always filtered through local histories, inequalities and social structures.

Appadurai also emphasized that globalization is deeply unequal. Not all people move through global systems with the same freedom. Migrants, refugees, precarious workers and marginalized populations often experience globalization through uncertainty and vulnerability. Anthropology therefore must examine both mobility and inequality simultaneously.

In many ways, Appadurai’s work represents anthropology’s movement beyond narrow textual postmodernism toward a broader analysis of global modernity, imagination and political economy.

### **Decolonizing Anthropology and the Politics of Knowledge**

One of the most powerful contemporary developments in anthropology has been the movement toward decolonizing knowledge. While postmodern anthropology exposed problems of representation and ethnographic authority, decolonial anthropology pushed the critique further by asking who controls global knowledge production itself.

Anthropology historically developed within Euro-American institutions, and many of its categories, theories

and methodologies emerged from colonial encounters. Decolonial scholars argued that even after formal colonialism ended, intellectual hierarchies often remained intact. Universities, journals, funding systems and theoretical canons continued privileging Western forms of knowledge while marginalizing indigenous, local and non-Western epistemologies.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith played a transformative role in this debate through *Decolonizing Methodologies*. Smith argued that research itself has historically functioned as a colonial practice through which indigenous peoples were classified, represented and governed without control over how knowledge about them was produced. Her critique resonated deeply across anthropology because it shifted attention from representation alone to ownership of knowledge.

Indigenous communities increasingly began demanding participation in defining research agendas, interpreting findings and controlling the circulation of knowledge about their lives. Collaborative and community-based research approaches gained importance because anthropology could no longer justify extractive forms of fieldwork where communities remained merely “informants” for academic careers.

Arturo Escobar further expanded these debates by critiquing Eurocentric models of development and modernization. Escobar argued that development discourse often imposes singular visions of progress upon communities while dismissing alternative ways of organizing life, ecology and economy. His idea of the “pluriverse” challenged anthropology to recognize multiple possible futures rather than one universal path of development.

These debates resonate strongly within India, particularly in relation to tribal and indigenous communities. Adivasi societies possess rich ecological knowledge, oral traditions and systems of social organization that have frequently been marginalized within mainstream development planning. Mining projects, large dams, industrial corridors and conservation policies often proceed through technocratic frameworks that inadequately recognize local knowledge systems and community rights.

Decolonial anthropology therefore has practical implications beyond academic theory. It challenges who gets to define development, conservation, modernity and progress. It also compels anthropology to rethink its relationship with policy, governance and activism.

The contemporary emphasis on localization within development discourse is closely connected to these debates. Increasingly, international organizations and donors speak about community ownership, local leadership and indigenous participation. Yet anthropology reminds us that localization cannot merely become another managerial slogan. Genuine localization requires redistribution of intellectual authority and institutional power, not just consultation exercises.

Thus, decolonial anthropology represents one of the most important contemporary extensions of postmodern critique because it shifts attention from textual representation to structural inequalities in global knowledge systems.

### **Digital Anthropology and Technological Transformation**

The digital revolution has transformed anthropology profoundly. Earlier anthropologists studied kinship, ritual, religion, exchange and political organization primarily within physical communities. Today, social life increasingly unfolds across digital platforms, virtual networks and algorithmic systems that blur distinctions

between online and offline worlds.

Contemporary anthropologists therefore examine how technology reshapes identity, labour, communication, intimacy, governance and inequality. Daniel Miller played a major role in establishing digital anthropology as a serious field of inquiry. His work demonstrated that digital technologies do not simply homogenize societies; rather, people appropriate technologies differently within specific cultural contexts.

Anthropologists now study:

- social media cultures,
- online political mobilization,
- artificial intelligence,
- digital surveillance,
- platform labour,
- gaming communities,
- virtual intimacy,
- and algorithmic governance.

Digital technologies have altered everyday life so deeply that anthropology can no longer treat technology as merely an external tool. Technology increasingly mediates kinship, friendship, work, memory, political identity and economic exchange.

In India, digital transformation has been exceptionally rapid. Smartphones, digital payment systems, Aadhaar-linked governance structures, online education, telemedicine, social media and e-commerce platforms have penetrated even remote regions. Tribal youth in Jharkhand or Odisha may simultaneously participate in local ritual worlds and global digital cultures. Migration networks now operate through WhatsApp groups, online transfers and digital communication. Political mobilization increasingly unfolds through social media narratives and algorithmic amplification.

Yet digital anthropology also reveals new inequalities. Access to technology is uneven, digital literacy varies significantly and surveillance capacities have expanded dramatically. Platform economies often create precarious forms of labour where workers remain dependent upon opaque algorithmic systems. Digital governance may improve service delivery while simultaneously intensifying bureaucratic monitoring and exclusion.

Anthropology's contribution here lies in demonstrating that technology is never culturally neutral. Digital systems are embedded within social structures of caste, class, gender, language and state power. Artificial intelligence, for instance, does not operate outside society; it reproduces biases and inequalities already present within data systems and institutional practices.

The contemporary anthropological study of technology therefore extends postmodern concerns regarding power and representation into the age of algorithms and digital governance. Technology is not merely transforming society; it is transforming what it means to be human, social and political in the contemporary world.

## **Anthropology of Capitalism, Bureaucracy and Political Economy**

Contemporary anthropology has increasingly returned to political economy after the heavily textual debates of the classical postmodern period. Anthropologists recognized that while representation and discourse remain important, material realities such as labour, debt, bureaucracy, inequality and capitalism cannot be ignored.

David Graeber became especially influential through his work on debt, bureaucracy and labour. Graeber showed that contemporary capitalism often produces forms of meaningless or alienated work while simultaneously expanding bureaucratic systems that regulate everyday life. His writings resonated widely because they combined anthropological imagination with political critique.

Anthropologists today increasingly study:

- corporations,
- NGOs,
- consulting industries,
- financial systems,
- humanitarian organizations,
- logistics networks,
- and platform economies.

This represents a major transformation within anthropology. Earlier anthropologists frequently focused on villages and kinship systems, whereas contemporary anthropology increasingly examines institutions of global capitalism and governance.

In India, this shift has become highly significant. Economic liberalization transformed labour relations, urbanization, migration patterns and consumption practices. Informal labour economies expanded, while digital capitalism and corporate governance reshaped aspirations and livelihoods. Anthropology therefore increasingly studies call centres, startup cultures, bureaucratic systems, welfare programs, microfinance networks and extractive industries.

At the same time, anthropology remains attentive to how capitalism interacts with older social hierarchies. Markets in India do not erase caste or gender inequalities; rather, they often reproduce them in new forms. Similarly, development programs and bureaucratic systems may appear technocratic while operating through deeply social processes of mediation, negotiation and exclusion.

This renewed engagement with political economy represents an important evolution beyond earlier postmodernism. Anthropology today seeks to integrate reflexive awareness with analysis of structural inequalities and material systems.

## **Ontological Turn, Ecology and the Reimagining of Human Worlds**

The “ontological turn” in anthropology represents another important contemporary development. Scholars such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Philippe Descola questioned deeply embedded Western distinctions between nature and culture, human and non-human, subject and object.

Rather than treating indigenous cosmologies merely as symbolic belief systems, these anthropologists suggested that different societies may inhabit fundamentally different worlds or ontologies. Forests, rivers, animals and spirits may not simply represent cultural metaphors but active participants within relational systems of existence.

These debates gained importance partly because ecological crisis forced anthropology to rethink human exceptionalism. Climate change, biodiversity collapse and environmental destruction revealed the limitations of modern industrial assumptions separating humans from nature.

Anthropologists increasingly began recognizing the value of indigenous ecological knowledge systems. Many tribal and forest-dependent communities possess sophisticated understandings of biodiversity, seasonal cycles, water systems and ecological balance developed over generations of interaction with local environments.

In India, these debates acquire exceptional significance because struggles over forests, mining, rivers, wildlife conservation and climate change are rarely only about the technical management of natural resources. Anthropological research increasingly demonstrates that such conflicts are, at a much deeper level, struggles between competing worldviews regarding land, ecology, development and the meaning of human life itself. What appears from the perspective of the state or corporations as a question of resource extraction, infrastructure expansion or environmental regulation is often experienced very differently by local communities, especially Adivasi and forest-dependent populations, for whom land is not merely an economic asset but a living social, cultural and spiritual landscape.

Modern development frameworks frequently approach forests, rivers and minerals as resources to be scientifically managed, commercially utilized or strategically conserved for national growth. In contrast, many indigenous and local communities understand these landscapes relationally rather than instrumentally. Forests may represent ancestral memory, sacred geography, livelihood security, medicinal knowledge, ritual practice and collective identity simultaneously. Rivers may be understood not simply as water systems but as living entities woven into moral and cosmological worlds. Anthropological studies therefore reveal that environmental conflicts often emerge because the state, corporations, conservation agencies and local communities operate with fundamentally different understandings of what nature itself means.

The long-standing struggles surrounding mining in central India illustrate this tension powerfully. In regions such as Jharkhand, Odisha and Chhattisgarh, large-scale extraction of coal, bauxite and iron ore has repeatedly generated conflicts between industrial development and indigenous rights. The Dongria Kondh resistance against bauxite mining in the Niyamgiri Hills of Odisha became globally significant precisely because the conflict could not be reduced to a simple debate over economic compensation or environmental clearance. For the Dongria Kondh community, the hills were not merely mineral-bearing landscapes; they were sacred living spaces associated with Niyam Raja, their deity, and formed the basis of their ecological, cultural and social existence. Anthropological engagement with the movement showed that the conflict represented a clash between two fundamentally different conceptions of land — one treating it as extractive capital and the other as a sacred ecological world inseparable from community life.

Similar tensions are visible in Jharkhand, where mining expansion has transformed landscapes inhabited by Santhal, Munda, Ho and Oraon communities. Anthropologists studying these regions have documented how displacement caused by mining is not experienced only as physical relocation. It frequently produces the

erosion of kinship networks, ritual landscapes, burial grounds, sacred groves and community memory. Development discourse may describe such displacement in terms of rehabilitation packages, employment generation or GDP growth, but anthropology reveals the deeper social and emotional dislocations involved when communities lose ecological spaces that structure their collective identity.

Environmental conservation itself has also generated important anthropological debates. Fortress-style conservation models historically treated forests as wilderness zones requiring protection from human presence. This often led to restrictions on forest access for communities that had lived within and managed these ecosystems for generations. Studies from tiger reserves and protected forest areas across India have shown that conservation policies sometimes reproduce colonial assumptions that indigenous populations are threats to nature rather than custodians of ecological balance.

Environmental conservation itself has also generated important anthropological debates. Fortress-style conservation models historically treated forests as wilderness zones requiring protection from human presence. This often led to restrictions on forest access for communities that had lived within and managed these ecosystems for generations. Studies from tiger reserves and protected forest areas across India have shown that conservation policies sometimes reproduce colonial assumptions that indigenous populations are threats to nature rather than custodians of ecological balance.

Anthropologists and environmental historians increasingly argue that many tribal communities possess sophisticated ecological knowledge systems developed through long interaction with forests, water systems and biodiversity. Practices relating to shifting cultivation, seed preservation, forest regeneration, seasonal harvesting and sacred groves often reflect highly evolved ecological understanding rather than “primitive” environmental behaviour, as they were once portrayed in colonial discourse. The Chipko movement in the Himalayan region, although emerging from a specific ecological and social context, demonstrated how local communities often understand forests not merely as timber resources but as sources of water security, soil protection, livelihood and social continuity. Women participating in the movement repeatedly articulated ecological concerns through everyday experiences of collecting fuelwood, fodder and water, thereby revealing how environmental knowledge is embedded within lived social relations rather than abstract scientific models alone.

Similarly, the struggles surrounding large dams, particularly the Narmada Bachao Andolan, revealed that displacement debates cannot be reduced to compensation packages or technical calculations regarding irrigation and electricity generation. Anthropological engagement with affected communities showed that rivers are experienced simultaneously as ecological systems, sacred landscapes, livelihood sources and historical memory. For displaced tribal populations, submergence often meant not only the loss of land but also the fragmentation of kinship networks, ritual spaces, oral traditions and community autonomy. Such movements therefore questioned dominant development paradigms that measure progress primarily through infrastructure and economic growth while underestimating social and ecological costs.

These concerns have become even more urgent in the era of climate change. Climate anthropology increasingly demonstrates that environmental crises are experienced unevenly across social groups. Communities contributing least to ecological degradation often bear the heaviest burdens of climate vulnerability. In India, recurring droughts, changing rainfall patterns, forest degradation, heat stress, water scarcity and extreme weather events disproportionately affect rural, tribal and economically marginalized populations whose lives remain closely tied to local ecosystems.

Anthropologists studying climate adaptation in tribal and forest regions have shown that local ecological knowledge frequently plays a critical role in community resilience. Knowledge relating to cropping cycles, drought-resistant seeds, forest foods, water conservation practices and biodiversity management often enables communities to survive environmental uncertainty more effectively than externally imposed interventions alone. Yet such knowledge systems are frequently marginalized within mainstream policy frameworks dominated by technocratic expertise and centralized planning.

The debates surrounding the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 further illustrate how environmental governance in India increasingly involves competing understandings of ecology and justice. Supporters of the Act argue that recognizing community forest rights strengthens both democratic inclusion and ecological stewardship because forest-dependent communities possess long histories of sustainable interaction with local ecosystems. Critics, however, sometimes fear that expanding community rights may threaten conservation objectives. Anthropology complicates this binary by demonstrating that conservation and community rights need not always exist in opposition. In many cases, ecological sustainability may actually depend upon strengthening local participation, customary knowledge and decentralized governance systems.

Such anthropological insights are particularly valuable because they move environmental debates beyond simplistic oppositions between development and conservation. They show that environmental conflicts are simultaneously political, cultural, ethical and epistemological. Different actors often inhabit fundamentally different understandings of nature itself. For corporations and extractive industries, forests may appear primarily as repositories of minerals, timber or economic value. For conservation bureaucracies, they may appear as biodiversity zones requiring scientific management. For indigenous communities, however, forests may represent ancestral worlds inhabited by spirits, memories, obligations and reciprocal relationships between humans and non-humans.

This is why contemporary anthropology increasingly speaks of ecological pluralism and multiple ontologies. The conflict is not merely over who controls resources, but over how reality itself is understood. Climate anthropology, political ecology and indigenous studies therefore increasingly converge around the argument that sustainable futures cannot be built solely through technological solutions or market-driven environmental policies. They require deeper engagement with questions of justice, community participation, cultural knowledge and alternative ways of imagining the relationship between humans and the natural world.

In this sense, anthropology contributes something profoundly important to contemporary environmental debates. It reminds policymakers, corporations and even scientific institutions that ecological crises are not only environmental problems. They are also crises of relationships — between state and citizen, market and community, technology and tradition, humans and nature, and ultimately between competing visions of what constitutes a meaningful and sustainable life.

### **Climate Anthropology and Ecological Crisis**

Climate change has emerged as one of the defining concerns of contemporary anthropology. Earlier anthropology often treated ecology as a background condition shaping culture. Today, ecological crisis stands at the center of anthropological inquiry.

Anthropologists increasingly study:

- climate displacement,

- water scarcity,
- ecological migration,
- mining conflicts,
- biodiversity loss,
- food insecurity,
- and environmental justice.

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing significantly shaped these discussions through her work on precarity, capitalism and ecological interdependence. Her writings demonstrate how global capitalism creates damaged ecological worlds while also generating unexpected forms of survival and collaboration.

Climate anthropology is especially important because it forces anthropology to integrate multiple scales of analysis simultaneously. Climate change is global, yet its impacts are intensely local and unequal. Tribal and marginalized communities often contribute least to ecological destruction while bearing disproportionate burdens of displacement, livelihood loss and environmental vulnerability.

In India, climate anthropology increasingly intersects with debates regarding mining, deforestation, water conflicts, agrarian distress and disaster vulnerability. Anthropologists study how communities adapt to changing ecological conditions while negotiating state policy, market pressures and technological interventions.

This field also reflects anthropology's growing interdisciplinarity. Climate research now involves collaboration with ecology, geography, environmental science, public policy and disaster studies. Yet anthropology contributes something unique by emphasizing lived experience, local knowledge, cultural meaning and unequal vulnerability.

Climate anthropology therefore represents one of the strongest contemporary examples of anthropology moving beyond purely textual postmodernism toward urgent engagement with planetary crisis.

### **Public Anthropology, Ethics and Contemporary Relevance**

One of the strongest criticisms directed at postmodern anthropology was that it became excessively inward-looking and preoccupied with textual debates disconnected from public concerns. Contemporary anthropology has responded to this criticism through renewed emphasis on public engagement and ethical responsibility.

Public anthropology seeks active engagement with issues such as:

- public health,
- migration,
- human rights,
- climate justice,
- democratic participation,
- inequality,
- and social exclusion.

Anthropologists increasingly work with governments, NGOs, activist networks, international agencies and community organizations. Yet this engagement also creates new ethical dilemmas because anthropology must balance critical independence with policy relevance.

The COVID-19 pandemic further demonstrated anthropology's public importance. Anthropologists contributed to understanding vaccine hesitancy, migrant distress, digital exclusion, caregiving systems and the social dimensions of public health. The pandemic revealed that crises cannot be understood only through biomedical or economic frameworks; they must also be understood culturally and socially.

In India, public anthropology has become especially important because issues of caste discrimination, tribal displacement, religious polarization, environmental degradation and digital inequality remain deeply connected to democratic life. Anthropology therefore continues to engage directly with some of the most pressing questions confronting Indian society.

Contemporary anthropology thus attempts to combine:

- reflexive awareness,
- empirical rigour,
- ethical sensitivity,
- and public relevance.

This combination represents one of the most important legacies of the postmodern turn. Anthropology today no longer claims detached neutrality, yet it also refuses to retreat into purely textual scepticism. Instead, it seeks responsible engagement with the unequal worlds it studies.

## **PART V**

### **Postmodernism, Social Justice and Empowerment in India**

#### **Tribals, Women and Marginalized Communities**

A valuable way to understand the continuing relevance of postmodernism is to examine how it helps explain social justice and empowerment in India. Postmodernism did not create struggles for justice, nor did it replace political economy, constitutional rights or grassroots movements. Its contribution lies elsewhere: it gave anthropology and social sciences a sharper language to question who defines "development," who represents marginalized communities, whose knowledge is treated as valid, and whose suffering remains invisible within dominant narratives.

In India, this becomes especially important because disadvantaged communities are often represented through official categories such as Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, minorities, women, backward classes, displaced populations or beneficiaries. These categories are necessary for policy and rights, but they can also flatten lived realities. Postmodernism helps us ask whether communities are being understood as thinking, speaking and historically active people, or merely as objects of welfare, enumeration and intervention.

For tribal communities, this critique is particularly relevant. Virginius Xaxa's work challenges the older view

of tribes as isolated, primitive or culturally frozen communities. He situates tribal questions within state policy, exclusion, land alienation, identity, citizenship and unequal development, making it clear that tribal marginalization cannot be explained only through culture or remoteness. It must be understood through history, political economy and the state's relationship with Adivasi societies. His *State, Society and Tribes* is especially important because it revisits the very concepts of "tribe" and "tribal society" in relation to policy and postcolonial governance.

This is where postmodern critique strengthens social justice discourse. It questions the language through which Adivasis are described as backward, isolated or development-deficient, and instead asks how displacement, forest laws, mining, conservation policies, weak public services and extractive development have produced vulnerability. In Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh and central India, mining conflicts show this clearly. For the state or corporations, land may appear as mineral-bearing territory; for Adivasi communities, it may be ancestral landscape, sacred ecology, livelihood base, burial ground, memory and identity. A postmodern anthropological lens helps reveal that the conflict is not merely overcompensation or rehabilitation; it is also over the meaning of land itself.

The Xaxa Committee, constituted in 2013 and reporting in 2014, reflected this wider concern by examining the socio-economic, educational and health status of tribal communities and recommending interventions. Its importance lies in shifting the discussion from welfare alone to historical disadvantage, rights, institutions and structural exclusion.

For women's empowerment, postmodernism's contribution is equally important. Feminist anthropologists in India, especially Leela Dube, showed that gender cannot be understood as a universal category detached from kinship, caste, family, ritual, property and everyday socialization. Her work on gender and kinship demonstrated that women's subordination is reproduced through intimate institutions, not merely through formal law or economic inequality. Sources on Dube's work highlight her role in shaping feminist anthropology in India and her argument that kinship systems provide a crucial context for locating gender relations in both personal and public life.

This is highly relevant to empowerment practice. Many development programs treat women as a uniform category: women beneficiaries, women entrepreneurs, women SHG members, women farmers. A postmodern-feminist approach asks: Which women? Dalit women, tribal women, Muslim women, widows, migrant women, landless women, women with disabilities, young unmarried women and elderly women experience power differently. Empowerment cannot be reduced to participation numbers or income generation alone. It must examine voice, bodily autonomy, intra-household power, mobility, dignity, violence, access to land, control over income and recognition within community institutions.

This also brings us to intersectionality, even if the term emerged more strongly from Black feminist scholarship outside India. In Indian conditions, social disadvantage is rarely single layered. A tribal woman in a mining-affected district may face gender inequality, ethnic marginalization, displacement, poor health access, language exclusion and ecological vulnerability simultaneously. A Dalit woman agricultural labourer may experience caste, class and gender oppression together. A Muslim woman in an urban informal settlement may face gendered constraints along with religious prejudice, insecure housing and precarious work. Postmodernism helps anthropology resist single-category explanations and instead understand layered, overlapping forms of marginality.

Subaltern Studies also strengthened this move by challenging elite-centered accounts of history and politics. Ranajit Guha and later scholars insisted that peasants, tribals and marginalized communities are not passive subjects of history but political actors with their own consciousness, strategies and forms of resistance. This was important for anthropology because it pushed researchers to take seriously oral histories, memory, everyday resistance and non-elite political imagination.

Practitioners working in development have also indirectly absorbed these insights, even when they do not use the language of postmodernism. Participatory rural appraisal, rights-based development, community-led planning, gender-sensitive programming, social audits, community forest rights and localization in development practice all carry a similar impulse: people must not be treated merely as recipients of expert-designed interventions. They must be recognized as knowledge-holders, decision-makers and rights-bearing citizens.

However, postmodernism also needs correction from political economy. It is not enough to say that marginalized communities are misrepresented. One must also ask why they remain poor, displaced or excluded. Scholars of political economy remind us that empowerment requires confronting land alienation, labour exploitation, caste hierarchy, patriarchy, state neglect, market exclusion and unequal access to institutions. Without this, postmodernism can become too focused on language and not enough on material change.

The strongest position, therefore, is a synthesis. Postmodernism helps us question dominant narratives, expose silences, value multiple voices and challenge imposed categories. Political economy helps us understand structures of exploitation, ownership, labour, capital and state power. Feminist anthropology helps us see the intimate and everyday reproduction of inequality. Tribal studies help us understand land, ecology, identity and citizenship. Together, they provide a much richer framework for social justice and empowerment in India.

The argument that postmodernism's relevance to India lies in its ability to make empowerment more democratic in meaning holds ground. Empowerment is not simply delivery of schemes, inclusion in statistics or participation in meetings. It is the ability of disadvantaged communities to define their own problems, speak in their own voices, protect their knowledge systems, negotiate with institutions, claim rights, reshape development priorities and be recognized as equal authors of India's democratic future.

## **PART VI**

### **CRITIQUES, LIMITATIONS AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE**

#### **Critiques of Postmodern Anthropology**

Despite its enormous intellectual influence, postmodern anthropology has never remained free from criticism, and many of the most important critiques emerged from within anthropology itself. While the postmodern turn successfully exposed problems of ethnographic authority, representation and colonial power, several scholars gradually began arguing that the discipline was moving too far toward scepticism and textual critique at the cost of social and political engagement. In attempting to dismantle earlier certainties, anthropology sometimes appeared to weaken its own ability to speak meaningfully about inequality, exploitation, violence

and injustice.

One major criticism was that postmodern anthropology became excessively preoccupied with language, discourse and representation while giving insufficient attention to material conditions shaping human life. Earlier anthropological traditions, particularly Marxist and political economy approaches, had focused strongly on labour systems, class relations, land alienation, capitalist expansion, state power and economic inequality. Postmodern anthropology, however, often shifted attention toward textual interpretation, narrative construction and the politics of ethnographic writing. Critics argued that this produced an imbalance within the discipline.

Marxist anthropologists were especially concerned about this shift. Scholars influenced by political economy argued that capitalism cannot be understood merely as a discourse or representational system because it operates through concrete structures of extraction, accumulation and control. Labour exploitation, corporate expansion, privatization, informalization of work, debt dependency and displacement are not simply textual phenomena; they are material realities that shape people's lives directly. From this perspective, there was concern that anthropology risked becoming overly absorbed in analysing how suffering is represented while paying less attention to the structural conditions that produce suffering in the first place.

These concerns became especially relevant in the context of globalization and neoliberal reforms. During the late twentieth century, widening inequality, precarious labour systems, agrarian distress, migration and ecological destruction were transforming societies across the world. Critics therefore asked whether anthropology could adequately engage with these crises if it remained excessively focused on textuality and epistemological uncertainty. In countries like India, where millions continue to confront poverty, caste discrimination, displacement and insecure livelihoods, the concern was particularly sharp. Could anthropology meaningfully engage with mining-induced displacement, bonded labour, hunger or agrarian suicides if every analytical category was treated as unstable and endlessly contestable?

Feminist anthropologists also offered important critiques of postmodernism, although their relationship with it remained complex. Feminist scholarship benefited greatly from postmodern critiques of authority because they helped expose how earlier anthropology often universalized male experiences and marginalized women's voices. Reflexivity, positionality and critique of representation strengthened feminist anthropology substantially. Yet many feminist scholars also worried that excessive relativism could unintentionally weaken political engagement with real forms of suffering and oppression.

For instance, if all truth claims are treated as equally unstable, how does one speak clearly against domestic violence, caste-based sexual violence, gender discrimination or trafficking? Feminist anthropologists argued that while knowledge is certainly situated and partial, some forms of suffering are materially real and demand ethical response. Anthropological caution regarding representation cannot become an excuse for moral paralysis. Nancy Scheper-Hughes, for example, argued strongly that anthropology cannot remain morally detached in the face of hunger, violence and systemic injustice. She called for a "militant anthropology" willing to engage ethically and politically with human suffering.

Another important criticism concerned the problem of excessive relativism. Postmodern anthropology destabilized universal claims to truth and emphasized that all knowledge is shaped by history, language and power. While this critique was valuable in exposing hidden assumptions within Western social science, critics feared that it sometimes pushed anthropology toward an intellectual position where no claim could be

evaluated more convincingly than another.

This raised difficult ethical and political questions. If every interpretation is partial and contingent, can anthropology still criticize racism, authoritarianism or ecological destruction with confidence? Can anthropologists defend human rights without being accused of imposing external moral frameworks? Can the discipline still distinguish between evidence-based analysis and ideological distortion?

These questions became especially urgent in the contemporary world marked by misinformation, hyper-nationalism, digital manipulation and climate denial. Some scholars worried that radical scepticism toward truth unintentionally created conditions where factual knowledge itself became vulnerable. If all narratives are treated merely as competing discourses, then scientific evidence regarding climate change, public health or social discrimination may lose public legitimacy. Anthropology therefore faced the challenge of remaining critically reflexive without sliding into epistemological nihilism.

A related criticism was that postmodern anthropology occasionally became inaccessible and overly abstract. The language of some postmodern writing was criticized for excessive theoretical complexity, dense terminology and stylistic obscurity. Critics argued that anthropology risked distancing itself from ordinary readers, communities and public debates. Instead of democratizing knowledge, overly theoretical writing sometimes appeared to create new forms of intellectual elitism.

This concern became particularly important in postcolonial societies such as India, where anthropology has historically maintained close relationships with development policy, tribal welfare, rural transformation and public institutions. Many Indian anthropologists therefore remained cautious about embracing forms of postmodernism that seemed disconnected from field realities and public engagement. Scholars such as Andre Béteille repeatedly emphasized that reflexivity and critique should strengthen scholarship rather than weaken standards of evidence, conceptual clarity and disciplined inquiry.

At the same time, it would be mistaken to assume that these criticisms simply reject postmodern anthropology altogether. In reality, most contemporary anthropologists accept many of postmodernism's central insights. Few scholars today would deny that ethnography involves interpretation, that researchers are socially located, or that representation is shaped by power relations. The real debate concerns how far such critique should go and how anthropology can retain analytical credibility while remaining self-aware.

The strongest contemporary anthropology therefore attempts to move beyond rigid oppositions between positivism and relativism, objectivity and subjectivity, science and interpretation. It recognizes that ethnographic knowledge is always partial, situated and historically conditioned, yet it also insists that disciplined inquiry, empirical depth and ethical responsibility remain possible and necessary.

This balanced position has become increasingly important in the contemporary world. Anthropologists today engage with some of the most urgent global crises:

- climate change,
- forced migration,
- religious polarization,
- digital surveillance,
- artificial intelligence,

- widening inequality,
- public health emergencies,
- ecological destruction,
- and democratic erosion.

Engagement with such issues requires both reflexive sensitivity and analytical seriousness. Anthropology cannot retreat into detached objectivism, but neither can it dissolve entirely into textual scepticism. Communities facing displacement, violence or ecological collapse require more than theoretical deconstruction; they require careful listening, historically grounded analysis and ethically accountable scholarship.

In this sense, the lasting contribution of postmodern anthropology lies not in destroying truth claims altogether, but in compelling anthropology to become more intellectually humble and ethically conscious about how truth claims are produced. The discipline emerged from these debates more aware of its own limitations, more sensitive to unequal structures of knowledge and more cautious about speaking for others without reflection.

Contemporary anthropology therefore increasingly seeks a productive middle ground. It acknowledges the politics of representation while continuing to engage with material realities. It accepts that knowledge is socially situated while defending the value of evidence-based inquiry. It embraces reflexivity without abandoning empirical fieldwork. Most importantly, it recognizes that anthropology's responsibility is not only to critique power but also to contribute meaningfully to understanding human suffering, resilience, ecological crisis and social transformation in an increasingly unequal and interconnected world.

## **Conclusion**

The journey of anthropology through postmodernism represents one of the most significant intellectual transformations in the history of the discipline. What began as a critique of ethnographic authority and representation gradually evolved into a much deeper rethinking of knowledge, power, culture, history and the ethical responsibilities of scholarship itself. Postmodern anthropology compelled the discipline to confront difficult and often uncomfortable questions regarding who produces knowledge, under what conditions such knowledge becomes authoritative, and how anthropological representations are shaped by unequal relations of power embedded within colonial histories, institutional structures and global systems of knowledge production.

The importance of this transformation lies not merely in the rejection of earlier certainties, but in anthropology's growing recognition that cultures, communities and identities cannot be understood as bounded, static or internally homogeneous entities existing outside history. The postmodern critique destabilized simplistic assumptions regarding objectivity and exposed the interpretive nature of ethnographic writing. It demonstrated that fieldwork does not produce transparent truths independent of language, positionality and institutional context. Anthropologists increasingly recognized that ethnography is not simply a neutral description of reality but a historically situated act of representation shaped by translation, selection, interpretation and narrative construction.

Yet the long-term significance of postmodernism cannot be reduced to textual scepticism or intellectual relativism. The discipline did not collapse under the weight of critique. Instead, anthropology underwent an

ethical and methodological reorientation that made it more reflexive, historically conscious and politically aware. Questions of representation gradually opened toward broader concerns relating to colonialism, subalternity, indigenous knowledge, gender, ecological crisis, migration, digital transformation and structural inequality. Anthropology emerged from these debates not weaker, but intellectually more self-aware and ethically more accountable.

The Indian experience demonstrates particularly well why anthropology after postmodernism cannot remain confined to abstract debates regarding discourse and textuality alone. In India, anthropology has always been deeply entangled with questions of caste, tribe, nationalism, development, state formation, displacement, democratic citizenship and ecological conflict. Colonial anthropology in India produced powerful classificatory systems through censuses, ethnographic surveys and administrative categories that continue to influence governance and identity even today. Postmodern and postcolonial critiques therefore acquired profound relevance because they revealed how categories such as tribe, caste, backwardness and tradition were historically constructed rather than naturally fixed.

At the same time, Indian anthropology also demonstrated the limitations of excessive relativism. Scholars such as Nirmal Kumar Bose, M. N. Srinivas, Andre Béteille, Yogendra Singh and Veena Das engaged critically with questions of reflexivity, ethics, modernity, violence and social transformation while retaining a strong commitment to empirical depth and public relevance. Their work illustrates that anthropology in deeply unequal societies cannot retreat into detached textual scepticism because communities continue to confront material realities such as poverty, displacement, ecological vulnerability, caste discrimination and state violence.

The contemporary phase of anthropology after postmodernism reflects this broader intellectual movement toward synthesis rather than polarization. Anthropology today increasingly combines reflexive awareness with renewed engagement in political economy, climate crisis, digital transformation, migration, bureaucracy, public health and environmental justice. Anthropologists no longer study only villages, kinship systems and ritual worlds in isolation. They now examine platform capitalism, artificial intelligence, digital surveillance, ecological collapse, humanitarian governance, algorithmic inequality, transnational migration and global development systems while continuing to remain attentive to everyday human experience.

This expansion of anthropological inquiry has become especially important in the twenty-first century because contemporary crises are simultaneously local and global. Climate change, for instance, cannot be understood only through atmospheric science or economic modelling. It must also be understood through lived experiences of drought, displacement, food insecurity, ecological memory and unequal vulnerability. Similarly, digital technologies are not merely technical systems; they reshape labour, kinship, communication, identity, citizenship and state power. Anthropology contributes uniquely to such debates because it insists that large structural transformations must always be understood through the textures of everyday life and human relationships.

The contemporary emphasis on decolonizing anthropology further deepens this responsibility. Indigenous and marginalized communities increasingly demand not only representation but participation in defining research agendas, development priorities and ecological futures. Anthropology therefore faces the challenge of moving beyond extractive knowledge practices toward more collaborative, accountable and community-centered forms of engagement. The growing discourse around localization in development and governance reflects similar concerns regarding intellectual authority, institutional power and community agency.

At the same time, anthropology must continue engaging critically with its own limitations. The critiques directed at postmodern anthropology remain highly relevant because they remind the discipline that reflexivity alone is insufficient. Anthropology cannot abandon evidence, conceptual clarity or analytical seriousness in the name of endless relativism. Nor can it remain disconnected from urgent public issues affecting contemporary societies. A discipline unwilling to engage with inequality, violence, ecological destruction, authoritarianism or technological transformation risks becoming politically irrelevant and intellectually fragmented.

The strongest anthropology today therefore seeks balance rather than certainty. It accepts that all knowledge is historically situated while still defending the possibility of disciplined inquiry. It recognizes the politics of representation without abandoning empirical research. It values reflexivity without dissolving into self-absorption. Most importantly, it combines critique with ethical engagement and public relevance.

Ultimately, anthropology after postmodernism is no longer simply the study of distant cultures or exotic others. It has become a discipline concerned with understanding humanity within interconnected, unequal and rapidly transforming worlds shaped simultaneously by memory, migration, technology, ecology, markets, identity and power. Its enduring contribution lies in reminding us that societies cannot be reduced merely to economic indicators, technological systems or administrative categories. Human beings live through relationships, meanings, emotions, histories, aspirations and moral worlds that remain central to social life even in an age dominated by algorithms, markets and planetary crisis.

In a century increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, ecological instability, mass displacement, digital surveillance and widening inequality, anthropology's role may become more important rather than less. The discipline continues to offer something that few others can provide with equal depth: a sustained effort to understand how human beings make meaning, negotiate power, remember suffering, imagine futures and struggle to preserve dignity within rapidly changing and unequal worlds. Anthropology's greatest strength after postmodernism therefore lies not in claiming absolute truths, but in cultivating forms of understanding that remain historically grounded, ethically responsible, intellectually self-aware and deeply attentive to the complexities of human life.

## **About the Author**

Kumar Amarendra Narayan Singh is a development practitioner, researcher and anthropological thinker with over three decades of experience working across the development sector, public policy, governance, livelihoods, primary health, disaster management, climate resilience and tribal development in India. He holds an M.Phil. and Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Delhi, Delhi, and has worked with leading national and international organizations including NGOs, multilateral institutions, management consulting firms and philanthropic initiatives.

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