

SEMESTER II, B.A. and B.SC

PAPER 3, SOCIO-CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Economic Anthropology may be regarded as a subfield of cultural anthropology pertaining to the study of human economic systems, across different cultures. The economic systems, generally deal with four important aspects: **production**, making goods or money; **distribution** or the allocation of the goods or money between different people, exchange, which refers to the transfer of goods or money between people or institutions; and **utilization** or **consumption**, which involves the using up of goods or money.

Till the 1920s, anthropologists did not pay much attention to the study of what later became 'economic anthropology' or the anthropological study of the working of economic systems in human society. The term 'economic anthropology' was coined by N.S.B.Gras (1927:10), an economic historian, who defined it as a 'synthesis of anthropological and economic studies' dealing with 'the study of the ways in which primitive people obtained a living.' Gras made a distinction between economic anthropology and 'anthropological economics'. According to him, the latter, in contrast to the former, deals with the 'study of the ideas that primitive people held about economic matters'. He strongly advocated greater research collaborations between anthropologists and economists, as in his view, 'anthropologists could provide those in the economic field with facts in return for ideas and the fundamental issues involved in getting a living' (1927:22). Despite his pioneering work, Gras did not have much impact upon later anthropologists working on economic systems.

PRODUCTION

Economic anthropologists, particularly the substantives scholars, have generally displayed a tendency towards over-emphasizing on the study of exchange processes and relations, with the result that study of production modes has not been accorded much priority. To cite Honnigman (1973), 'they do not analyze or theories about the forces and relations of production or about the creation of commodities, but invariably restrict themselves to the circulation and destination of commodities already produced'. He further opines that Polanyi's tripartite scheme of reciprocity, redistribution, and market exchange presupposes production modes but does not link up with them; the social concomitants of transactional modes, not of production modes are of dominant concern to him and his followers.

In economic anthropology, production has been given its due importance by the Marxian anthropologists, with Marx emphasizing on the centrality of production to the economy. According to Dalton (1961:6), Marx perceives the economy as a process of interaction between men and their environment, a process through which men as producers 'integrate the use of natural resources and techniques and assure continuous cooperation in the provision of material

goods'. Also, according to Marx (1904a:11), the economic base or mode of production in every society is made up of two components: (i) the force of production, the physical and technological arrangement of economic activity, and (ii) the social relations of production, the interpersonal and intergroup relationships that men must establish with one another as a consequence of their roles in the production process.

Production, for the purpose of simple societies, may be basically studied under the two heads: food collection and food production.

Food Collection

Food collection, encompassing the production strategies of hunting, fishing and gathering, refers to all forms of subsistence technology in which food is secured from naturally occurring resources such as wild plants and animals, without significant domestication of either. Food collection is the oldest survival strategy known to man. But in the present day, there are very few communities left in the world who are entirely dependent on hunting and gathering for livelihood such as the Australian aborigines, living in the arctic regions of Canada, the Andamanese tribes like the Onge and Jarawa etc. However, a number of communities continue to practice hunting-gathering and fishing to supplement their nutrition from agriculture. For instance, in the state of Assam, many of the tribes such as the Karbis, Tiwas, Mishings, Rabhas etc. are experts in the art of fishing and hunting, which they practice in conjunction with agriculture. While the study of exclusively hunter-gatherer communities may help us arrive at some understanding of man's life in the past, Ember and Ember (1994) cautions against the excessive use of contemporary observations to draw inferences about the past for a number of reasons. In their view, we must understand that the earlier hunter-gatherers lived in almost all types of environments, including some very bountiful ones and not like the contemporary ones who live mostly in marginal areas and, therefore, are not comparable. Moreover, the contemporary hunter gatherers are not relics of the past and like us have evolved continuously. Nor in the past did hunter-gathering communities have the opportunity to interact with agriculturists, pastoralists, industrial/capitalist societies.

Contemporary hunters-gatherers live in a variety of geographical locations and climates but mostly in marginalized areas where agriculture is not feasible. Nevertheless, such groups seem to share a number of cultural attributes like the fact that most live in small groups in sparsely populated areas and adhere to a nomadic lifestyle. For them, the camp is the main center of daily activity and the place where food sharing actually occurs. According to Honigmann (1973), the hunter-gatherer society is egalitarian, does not recognize individual land rights and do not accumulate surplus foodstuffs, often an important source of status in agricultural societies. Such communities usually do not have a class system or specialized or full-time political officials. Division of labour is largely on the basis of age and sex. Ethnographic and archaeological evidence indicate that with few exceptions, such societies generally have a sexual division of labour, where men hunt and usually do the fishing while women gather wild plant foods. Sahlins (1968) calls them the 'original affluent society' despite the fact that hunter-gatherers consume less energy per capita per year than any other group of human beings. According to Sahlins, ethnographic data indicates that hunter-gatherers worked far fewer hours

and enjoyed more leisure than typical members of industrial society, and they still ate well. Their 'affluence' came from the idea that they are satisfied with very little in the material sense.

Food Production

The origins of food production began about 10,000 years ago in the Neolithic period when man took the first steps from merely utilizing to transforming nature through the cultivation and domestication of plants and animals. Archaeological data indicate that various forms of domestication of plants and animals arose independently in six separate locales worldwide during the period from 8000 to 5000 BC, with the earliest known evidence found throughout the tropical and subtropical areas of southwestern and southern Asia, northern and central Africa and Central America (Gupta, 2010). According to anthropologists, on its own, the physical environment has more of a limiting rather than a determining impact on the kinds of subsistence choices made. For instance, according to Binford (1990), further away from the equator, food collectors depends much less on plants for food and much more on animals and fish.

MODE OF EXCHANGE

Exchange has consistently remained the central focus of anthropologists interested in the study of economic systems and their working in society. While being closely related concepts, the main point of distinction between the two is that while distribution determines the proportion of total output that the individual will receive, exchange determines the specific products into which the individual wants to convert the share allocated to him by distribution (Honigmann 1973). He further opines that distribution implies a reward system in which produce is channeled out among individuals or groups by reason of their control over the factors of production or for the labour they expended in the productive process.

Exchange, on the other hand, refers to the various processes by which goods (and services) move or are being transferred between individuals or groups, as, for example, between producer and consumer, buyer and seller, donor and recipient. Firth's (1965a) work among the Tikopia is a seminal study on distribution. In his view, every society has explicit or implicit norms on how the total pool of products is to be shared among its members and that these norms are geared to address the issue of division of a joint product and the compensation of the factors of production, especially labour. His observation of the principles of distribution in the Tikopia economy, which hold equal relevance for many pre-industrial economies, led him to certain conclusions. According to him (1965a:313), there is a 'definite concept that all participants in a productive activity should receive a share of the product, but that social considerations do not make it necessary for this share to be exactly proportionate to the contribution in time, labour, or skill that each individual has made'. Such inequalities in terms of allocation are particularly evident in tribal and peasant societies, where social and/or political achievement entitles some individuals to more than an equal share of material reward. Sahlins' (1968) study indicates that despite these 'inequalities' in distribution, the relationship between a chief and the followers in most tribal societies is not exploitative in nature but based on the principle of generalised reciprocity (we will come to it later in our discussion).

Now, we shall discuss the 'action, or act, of reciprocal giving and receiving' (Gregory, 1998) or exchange. According to Commons (1954), the concept of exchange, from the anthropological viewpoint, embraces two distinct kinds of transfer events: physical transfers and jural transactions. While the former involves locational movement and physical control; the second involves the transfer of culturally defined ownership and use rights. It is the latter aspect which has aroused the interests of anthropologists from the very beginning.

Traditional economic system is usually associated with the simple societies like the tribal societies, rural societies, etc. It is chiefly characterised by subsistence mode of production with little surplus production. This economy is usually supplemented by other minor occupations like collection of forest produce etc. However the most important features of the traditional economic system is that of various modes of exchange.

Let us now discuss different mode of exchanges prevailing among different societies.

1 Barter System

Barter system is the direct exchange of goods and services i.e an exchange may be goods for goods, goods for services, service for service etc. It is considered to be the earliest form of exchange in Human society. Barter usually replaced money as the method of exchange during crisis like war, natural calamity, etc.

2 Silent System

Silent trade (also known as silent barter or trade and dumb barter) is a peculiar form of exchange where the exchanging parties do not come into face to face interaction during the process of exchange. The exchanging partners could be enemies or antagonised. One group of people leaves certain quantity of products at a customary place to be taken by another group, who in turn leaves back some other products. The pygmy Semang and Sakai of Malaya and the Vedda and Sinhalese of Sri Lanka practice silent trade.

3 Jajmani System

William H Wiser (1988) has introduced the term Jajmani system in his book, *The Hindu Jajmani System: A Socio-Economic System Interrelating Members Of A Hindu Village Community In Services*, where he described in detail how different caste group interact with each other in the agriculture based system of production, distribution and exchange of goods and services. In different parts of India different terms are used to describe this economic interaction among the castes, for example in Maharashtra the term *Balutadar* or *bara batute* and *mera* or *mirasi* in rural Rayalaseema of Andhra Pradesh, *jajmani* in North India, *mirasi* in Tamil Nadu and *adade* in Karnataka.

Jajmani System, (Hindi: deriving from the Sanskrit yajamana, "sacrificial patron who employs priests for a ritual") is reciprocal (usually asymmetrical and some scholars term it non-reciprocal) social and economic arrangements between families of different castes within a village community in India for the exchange of goods and services. Here, one family exclusively performs certain services for the other, such as ministering to the rituals or providing agricultural labour, or some goods such as agricultural implements, pots, baskets etc in return for payment, protection, and employment security. These relations are supposed to continue from one

generation to the next, and payment is normally made traditionally, in the form of a fixed share in the harvest rather than in cash.

Ceremonial Exchange

It is a kind of social system in which goods and services are given to relatives, friends and neighbours on various social occasions like birth ritual, marriage, death rituals, etc. The basic initiative of this exchange is to establish good relations between the various social groups in the society.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity consists of giving and taking goods and services in a social medium without the use of money, which ranges from pure gift giving to equal exchange to cheating or deceitful. Under reciprocity, there are again three forms: general reciprocity (the gift giving without any immediate or planned returned), balanced reciprocity (the exchange with the expectation of return that involves a straight forward immediate or limited-time span) and negative reciprocity (an attempt to take advantage of another or something for nothing).

Reciprocity constitutes the main basis of exchange in most non-market economies. According to Sahlins (1965b:145-49), reciprocity may be defined into three types based on the criterion of the stipulation of material returns, which are as follows:

a) **Generalised reciprocity**, involving unstipulated reciprocation, is gift giving without consideration of any immediate or planned return. In such a case, the value of the gift is not calculated and the time of repayment not specified.

Such type of reciprocity generally occurs only among close kin or people sharing close emotional bonds such as between parents and children, between siblings, close friends etc.

b) **Balanced or Symmetrical reciprocity** occurs when someone gives to someone else, expecting a fair and tangible return - at a specified amount, time, and place (Bonvillian, 2010). Here, the exchange occurs owing to the desire or need for certain objects. Giving, receiving and sharing constitute a form of social security and according to Honigmann (1973), it promotes an egalitarian distribution of wealth over the long run. While generally practiced among equals who are not closely related, balanced reciprocity principles may also be evident in gift giving among kin. To cite a particular example, among relatives in many parts of India, it is common practice for kin to give valuable items and even monetary contribution when a relative's daughter is being married off. The implicit expectation being that when their own daughter is married off, similar contributions could be expected from the receivers. Sometimes there is a fine line between generalised and balanced reciprocity particularly gift giving in urban society, where though it might appear to be generalised reciprocity, there may be strong expectations of balance. For instance, two families residing in the same neighbourhood in Delhi may try to exchange gifts of fairly equal value, say based on calculations of what last year's Diwali gift's cost.

c) **Negative reciprocity** :-it is an exchange of goods/services in which at least one party tries to get something without giving anything and hence does not get any punishment.

MARKET EXCHANGE

In very broad terms, a market/ market exchange involves the buying and selling of goods, labour, land, rentals, credit etc. by persons, using an intermediary token of common exchange value. According to Honigmann (1973), such a two party market transaction could very well become a form of negative reciprocity, unless some sort of arrangement has been made to ensure at least an approach to balance. Although market exchange need not necessarily involve money, most commercial transactions, particularly nowadays do involve money (Ember & Ember, 1994). Again, while most of such transactions take place in a specifically designated market place, a market may exist without a designated physical place. This is more so in the contemporary world, where significant market transactions take place on the internet. On the other hand, in simple societies, a market place may signify much more than a place where economic transactions are performed. In rural and tribal India, even today, weekly *haats* or markets provide an opportunity for people to renew friendships, exchange local gossip, arrange marriages, while some may also have deep cultural significance.

Reliance on the market and the use of general purpose money is increasing universally, with traditional subsistence giving way to commercialization due to factors like demand, increased interaction with other societies etc. According to Plattner (1985), the substantivist stance in economic anthropology is rendered redundant in the context of markets in the present day. In his words, 'the pretense that theories of markets and marketing were irrelevant became less viable' in a world that increasingly resembles a market system. At the same time, according to Dilley (1992), over-simplistic notions of economic man as individual maximize of economic value, as enunciated by the formalist position, have now receded in the face of theoretical criticism that such assumptions provide few convincing explanations of socio-economic status.

THE DISTRIBUTION OF GOODS AND SERVICES:

Kula

According to Malinowski (1922), Kula is a ceremonial exchange among Trobriand Islanders of New Guinea. Kula is also known as kula exchange or kula ring. It is a complex system of visits and exchange of two kinds of ornaments as well as trading of food and other commodities with the people of other islands. Because the islands are differentially endowed with different natural resources, each island could produce only a few specialized products or commodities and have to depend upon other islands for other essential things and objects.

Because trading involves visiting distant and strange islands which may be risky, the Trobrianders have worked out *kula* for a safe and secure trade by establishing trade partnership by means of exchanging *kula* ornaments and also gift giving. The essence of such trade relations is not the trade in itself but it is subdued or embedded in a ceremonial exchange of valued shell ornaments. The Kula ornaments are of two types. One consists of shell-disc necklaces (*veigunor Soulava*) that are traded to the north (circling the ring in clockwise direction) and the other are shell armbands (*Mwali*) that are traded in the southern direction (circling counter-clockwise).

Mwali was given with the right hand, the Soulava given with the left hand, first between villages then from island to island. If the opening gift was an armband, then the closing gift must be a necklace and vice versa. These are exchanged in a ceremonial ambience purely for purposes of enhancing mutual trust relationships, securing trade, and enhancing one's social status and prestige. The Kula ornaments are not in themselves remarkably valuable. However, these ornaments are loaded with folklore, myths, ritual, history etc which generate a lot of enthusiasm and bind together the trading partners. Exchange of these ornaments facilitates trading of goods with ease in the island visited as the trading partner in the host island helps the visitor(s). However, people participating in the Kula ring never indulge in any bargaining on the objects given and taken. Individual members trade goods while circulating the Soulava and Mwali in a cordial atmosphere.

Potlatch

Potlatch is an elaborate feast among the American Indian groups of Northwest Coast at which huge quantities of food and valuable goods (such as blankets, copper pieces, canoes, etc.) are pompously and competitively distributed to the guests in order to humiliate them as well as to gain prestige for the host. Burning huge quantities of goods is also common. Potlatches are organised by individuals like village chiefs or a group of individuals or villages. The chief of a village invites a neighbouring village to attend the potlatch which the latter invariably has to accept. The guests in turn invite the hosts to attend the potlatch to be given by them. Though such distribution of gifts take place in a competitive way, it also serves as a leveling mechanism where food and gifts get equally distributed among various villages in a wide area in the long run. Similar feasts are organised among the Melanesian societies (New Guinea) wherein large number of (in hundreds) pigs are slaughtered. Several villages attend these feasts. It appears that such large scale feasts are a waste. But these feasts serve the mechanism of 'storing' surplus food produced during good seasons, not by storing in bins, but by feeding the pigs. Thus pigs become food-storing repositories which can be used as food during lean seasons. If successive years are also good, there will be over production of food that goes to pigs. As a result, the size of drove grows into an unmanageable proportion, pigs destroy crops. In order to reduce the drove size, a large number of pigs are slaughtered and a huge feasts is organised by inviting guests from other villages. As a result, the pig population gets drastically reduced and their menace on the fields also gets reduced. Such feasts take place between villages reciprocally and the excess food (pigs) gets redistributed. These feasts are not necessarily competitive but in a few cases, in order to keep up one's status, some 'Big men' of Melanesian societies organize such huge feasts.