

B.A and B.SC ANTHROPOLOGY

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DIFFUSIONISM

Diffusionism theory interpreted the growth of culture in terms of “cultural similarities”, “mutual contact”, “cultural cradle”, “culture area”, “*kulturkreise*” (culture circle). Diffusionists negated the principle of Unilinear Evolution and studied geographical distribution and migration of cultural traits, and reflected that cultures are patch work of traits interwoven with numerous histories and origins. According to diffusionists, various culture complexes develop at various times in different parts of the world and later on diffuse to other parts of the world mainly due to migration. They thus, opined that culture has grown in course of history not because of evolution, but because of transmission of culture due to migration and mutual contact.

In the early part of the 19th century three main schools of thoughts evolved to study diffusion;

- a) British Diffusionist School
- b) German Diffusionist School
- c) American Diffusionist School

British Diffusionist School

The British Diffusionist School mainly talked about ancient Egypt as the cultural cradle of the world. Also known as heliocentric diffusion, the theory was based on the conviction that culture originated from one culture centre. The most prominent British “diffusionists” were Grafton Elliot Smith, W.H.R. Rivers and William James Perry.

Grafton Elliot Smith (1871-1937) the pioneer of the British School advocated that culture first evolved in Egypt and had spread to the far corners of the world from about 4000 B.C. He and Perry believed that cultural development had begun about

6000 years ago. Smith (1928:22) stated that prior to that time, the earth was inhabited by “Natural Man” who were nomads and lacked domestication of animals, agriculture, houses, clothing, but religion, social organisation, hereditary chiefs and formal laws or ceremonies of marriage or burial. In approximately 4000 B.C the inhabitants of the Nile Valley “appreciated the fortunate chance provided them by a “natural crop” of barley and adopted a settled mode of life (ibid: 32). Thus, following the matrix of evolution the Egyptians according to Smith invented pottery, basketry, building houses; started domestication of animals; built towns and learned to bury their dead in cemeteries and began the worship of deity. Having accomplished their own civilisation, they set out to explore the world, and in so doing the Egyptians rapidly spread through diffusion and colonisation. Smith correlated similarities between Egyptian complex of large stone monuments related to the sun worship and that of Megaliths of England such as stone hedge. Thus, arriving at the conclusion that megalithic monuments of England were crude imitations of Egyptian pyramids and mastabas, as a case of migration, he first published his views in an article in 1911. Later he studied Maya pyramids, Japanese Pagodas, Cambodian and Balenese Temples and American burial mounds. Smith published his Pan-Egyptian theory of diffusion in the book entitled *Origin of Civilisation* published in 1928.

W.J. Perry (1887-1949) was an adherent follower of the theory postulated by Smith, he strengthened the hands of Smith in formulating the school though there was no specific theoretical contribution on his part. His books *The Children of the Sun* (1923) and *Gods and the Men* (1927) were the major contributions to the British school of diffusionism which firmly established Egypt as the centre of civilisation.

W.H.R. Rivers (1864-1922) *The History of the Melanesian Society* published in 1914 leaned heavily on the theory of degeneration. He sought the explanation of

contrasts among Melanesian and Polynesian cultures in terms of original complexes which had allegedly been spread by successive waves of migration. Herein, he explained the role of migration, assimilation and acculturation, based on assumption of how boatloads of men migrated to these islands and married local women and assimilated with the islanders, barring their original burial rituals. W.H.R. Rivers was of the opinion that the similarities in cultures could be explained by closely examining the patterns of imitation and migration. Thus, his summation was in line with the theory of un-inventiveness put forward by his contemporaries Smith and Perry.

Criticisms

- a) Egypt as the only epicenter of all invention was the greatest flaw that led other anthropologists to denounce this school as extreme diffusionists.
- b) Hypothetical assumption of human beings as un-inventive to explain Egypt as the only centre of invention was not acceptable to the later anthropologists.
- c) Only simple form of diffusion i.e diffusion of culture traits was taken into account while diffusion of culture complex was not emphasised.
- d) Material culture was predominantly explained while non-material aspects of culture were not taken into account.

The British School of Diffusionism was the last one among the three schools to emerge and the first one to disappear.

German Diffusionist School

The scholars of the German Diffusionist School were of the opinion that culture traits and complexes emerged independently in many areas and then dispersed to other parts of the world. '*Kulturkries*' or Culture-Circle school of thought as it is known, differs from the British school of diffusionism in its basic concept of origin of culture. *Kulturkries* School attributed development of cultures not to one

particular place but to several places at several different times. Culture traits and culture complexes were believed to have originated independently at several parts of the world from where it was imitated and diffused to other places due to migration. Thus, according to the German Diffusionist School each culture trait or culture complex had a circle or district leading to the concept of culture circles.

Thus, we see that the German School of Diffusion did not completely negate the theory of evolution. The roots of the *Kulturkreis* School can be traced to the founder of anthropogeography Friedrich Ratzel.

Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904), Leo Frobenius (1873-1938), Fritz Graebner (1877 - 1934) and Wilhelm Schmidt (1868-1954) the herbingers of the German Diffusionist School had followed in the lines of the propogators of the theory of evolution emphasising the uniqueness of each cultural heritage. While at the same time argued that cultural evolution was not unilineal thereby denouncing Tylor's psychic unity of mankind and reflected that technological development alone cannot judge the complexity of a particular culture. The diffusionist aimed at a comprehensive survey of the spread of cultural traits from the earliest times. In this regard Ratzel using the comparative method traced the similarities of the bow and arrow in his work *The History of Mankind* (1896). He studied the similarities in the cross section of the bow shaft, the material and fastening of the bow string and the feathering of the arrow of different societies. Based on the study Ratzel concluded that the bow and arrow of Indonesia and West Africa were related. Using the same technique Ratzel's pupil Leo Frobenius widened the spectrum of the material culture to masks, houses, drums, clothings and shields to present similarities between Melanesia, Indonesia and West Africa.

Fritz Graebner who was a museum curator in Germany worked on the culture circle and culture strata in Oceania and Africa and further developed the idea and tried to give it a global perspective. In his famous book *Methodder*

Ethnology(1911) he tried to explain the criteria for identifying affinities and chronologies or similarities and historical relationships. Based on the reconstruction of chronology

Graebner could identify as many as six historically similar cultural developments which had counterparts in other parts of the world.

- i) Tasmanian culture
- ii) Australian boomerang culture
- iii) Totemic Hunter culture
- iv) Two-class horticulturist culture
- v) Melanesian bow culture and
- vi) Polynesian Patrilineal culture

Father Wilhelm Schmidt born in Australia was a self proclaimed follower of Graebner. To understand the cultures of the world, both Graebner and Schmidt applied two rules as discussed below and divided the world into different strata and circles (Upadhyay & Pandey: 109).

i) Criteria of Form as called by Graebner and Criteria of Quality as stated by Schmidt reflected that similarities between two culture elements which do not automatically arise out of nature, material purpose of traits or objects, should be interpreted as a result of diffusion irrespective of the distance that might separate the two instances.

ii) Criteria of Quantity stated that the probability of historical relationship between two items increases as the number of additional articles/items/artifacts showing similarities increases.

Schmidt distinguished four major grades of culture circles which are till date referred to;

- i) Primitive culture circle
- ii) Primary culture circle

iii) Secondary culture circle

iv) Tertiary culture circle

Criticisms of the German Diffusionist School

- Diffusionist school focused on what is diffusion but never explained the causes of diffusion and how it takes place. The methodology did not take into account the dynamics of culture change.
- Despite the identification of 4-5 bands with their own migration patterns being reflected upon yet nothing concrete on culture circles could be established.
- Diffusionist school also relied heavily on the museum methodologies. The main component of this school was thus, typology of culture traits rather than on the explanation of the causes of spread of diffusion.

American Diffusionist School

The American School of Diffusionism picked up the threads of the German School of Diffusionism and tried to explain the causes of the spread of diffusion. The 13 founder of this school was Franz Boas (1858-1942) who was followed by Clark Wissler (1870-1947) and Albert L Kroeber (1876-1960). The culture area approach was a significant part of this school while trying to map and classify the tribal groups of North and South America and show the diffusion of culture traits and complexes. Diffusion as a cause for similar traits was explained by the American school as a result of adaptation and migration. Thus, the culture area approach was used to show the diffusion of traits among different tribes. The American school divided the world into different culture areas on the basis of geographical regions. This in turn led to the listing of traits found in the cultures. The list consisted of traits which might have been either adapted or migrated due to diffusion. This concept was emphasised by Wissler while Kroeber, Herskovits and Sapir supported the approach. Clark Wissler took into account the historical questions

and his biggest contribution was the *age-area hypothesis*. In an age where radio carbon dating was yet to appear on the scene, it was difficult to ascertain the real age of the artifacts. Clark at such a juncture came up with the age area hypothesis that assumed that culture traits tended to spread from the centre towards the periphery of any culture area. This was also known as the ‘law of diffusion’.

Melville Herskovits during this era gave the explanation of ‘culture trait’ and ‘culture complex’ through his work which is best known as the “Cattle Complex of East Africa”. While Kroeber’s contribution was immensely seen towards the theory by listing and generating long list of culture traits. For any particular culture trait like hunting or fishing, the list ran to many thousands of similar culture traits across the globe. Franz Boas in following this approach had taken into account the psychic bases of human beings and thus, the American School did not discard the theory of Psychic Unity as postulated by the Evolutionist School though it also took into account the historical aspects. This shift led to the rise of the School of Historical Particularism.

Reflection

Culture Trait: The simplest basic unit into which a culture can be analysed. Such a trait is a specific entity within the culture. A combination of traits is a culture complex. A trait may be diffused independently and may join freely with other traits. (Tylor: 540, 1991)

Culture Complex: An organically related group of culture traits in a culture area, e.g., the cattle complex of East African cultures. In diffusion (q.v), the traits of a culture complex will probably remain associated. The traits are usually logically associated with each other. (Tylor: 125. 1991)

Culture Area: A region which has a relatively similar way of living common to its component socio-economic systems and cultures. The centre of the culture area has

uniform customs but its periphery may be less homogeneous. The concept is more relevant to material culture than to other aspects of culture. (Tylor: 37, 1991)