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Paper No. : 02 Social Cultural Anthropology

Module : 24 Introduction to Political Anthropology



Development Team

Principal Investigator

Prof. Anup Kumar Kapoor
Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi

Paper Coordinator

Prof. Sabita Acharya, Department of Anthropology,
Utkal University, Bhubaneswar

Content Writer

Indelha Khan
Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi

Content Reviewer

Prof. A.K. Sinha, Department of Anthropology,
Panjab University, Chandigarh

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 **Pathshala**
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Summary

Learning objectives:

- To familiarize with the concept of power, leadership and politics.
- To understand the concept of political anthropology.
- To understand the link between religion and politics.

Introduction:

In several occasions, it has been observed that colonial powers or resilient societies have levied political rule on the native people, where previously no such system prevailed. The initiation of elementary form of political system had varying impact in particular societies. Such differences probably originated as a result of functionally relatedness to the cultures and social system of the colliding societies. The subject of Political Anthropology broadly includes the Tribal Panchayat or the modern elected body, the government's organization, tribal law and justice, etc. briefly are the subject of the Political Anthropology. Political Anthropologists, in day to day discussions, usually term 'orientations' or 'approaches' by which they study and explore political phenomena. The term 'politics' refers to the practices of agents who work within the political structures and systems or are related to them in any manner. In regard to this, anthropologists seek as to how political agents i.e. leaders use skills, power, shrewdness, wisdom and various other strategies to pursue goals and meet their ends. Political agents and leaders include big men, Shamans, Sicilian bandits, Chiefs, Pathan saints etc, which forms the sources and means of political process.

The political agents like, leaders often engage in strategies and plans to gain power in order to increase their authority, enhance their legitimacy, defeat a competitor, retain their right to govern and bend others according to their will. In terms of politics, these varied goals are usually identified as public and are prosecuted in the service of constituencies and the public welfare.

1. Development of Political Anthropology:

1.1 The Nineteenth-Century Evolutionists:

Darwin's influence led to the development of cultural anthropology in the second half of the nineteenth century just as it led for the biology. The evolutionary theory emerging from this period was as primeval as the societies, it sought to make sense of, which meant, the evolutionary schemas were rigorous and simplistic, there were debates regarding whether the primitive societies were matriarchal or patriarchal, customs were being torn out by their cultural context which used to be compared by the armchair anthropologists, who never came across the savages that were their subjects. Before this period, the tradition that traced back to the era of Plato through most philosophers like Aristotle, Hobbes, Rousseau, was that the lower stages were characterized by anarchy and the politics and government were basically the product of civilization.

One of the earliest challenge against this view came forth from Sir Henry Maine, who in his work 'Ancient Law'(1861) stated that the ancient society was organized along the lines of kinship ties, was patriarchal in orientation and was ordered by sacred proscriptions. The direction of Evolution was that of secularization and organization was based on territory i.e. 'local contiguity' and not on kinship. In 'Ancient Society' Louis Henry Morgan developed the concept of primary sociopolitical structure. On

the basis of mode of subsistence, Henry Morgan based his evolutionary sequence; he termed the stages as savagery, barbarism and civilization i.e. the initial stage of hunting-gathering, horticulture and developed agriculture.

Social organization mainly started with promiscuity that developed into kin-based units, which were oriented along the sexual lines i.e. inter-marriage between male siblings and female siblings. The socio-political structure, at this level is that of egalitarian and has its basis on inter-personal relations. The complete specialization in terms of political sphere is not visible unless the complete domestication of plants and animals creates adequate surplus, which leads to the urbanization and private property. Thus, true governance is based upon territory and property.

1.2 The Reaction:

The two fundamental changes i.e., the rejection of evolutionary theory and methodology, and a growing gap between the anthropologies of the United States and of England and France majorly characterized the early twentieth century anthropology. The shift was basically based upon the work of Emile Durkheim, which lead to the increased cognitive-structuralism which terminated with the work of Claude Levi Strauss. Durkheim had little impact on cultural anthropology,U.S.A. whereas ‘Historical Particularism’ of Franz Boas dominated. Robert Lowie came up with his discussion to deal with the political aspect; through his work ‘The Origin of the State’ (1927).He realized and brought to recognition, the political importance of associations in connecting diverse and separate groups. He observed these as being the basis of the state. He thus altered this view, showing how associations can come across as ‘separatistic’ as kin relations. Inorder to acquire higher level of integration, a superordinate authority is required by the associations.

1.3 The British Functionalists:

The two categories of functionalism strive for dominance which are: Bronislaw Malinowski’s ‘psychobiological functionalism’ and A.R.Radcliffe-Brown’s ‘structural-functionalism’. The founder of modern fieldwork tradition is often considered to be Bronislaw Malinowski, for his extensive level of research in Trobriand Islands, which depicted cultural institutions as derived from specific psychological and biological needs. Though he gave little contribution to the political anthropology, but his work on religion, law and economics, indirectly cleared the route for the kind of specialization, that would later become quite prevalent. Thus Malinowski’s participant observation method became an exemplary for an entire generation of British fieldworkers, whose vivid analyses of African societies would result into the establishment of political anthropology as a well-founded subdiscipline.

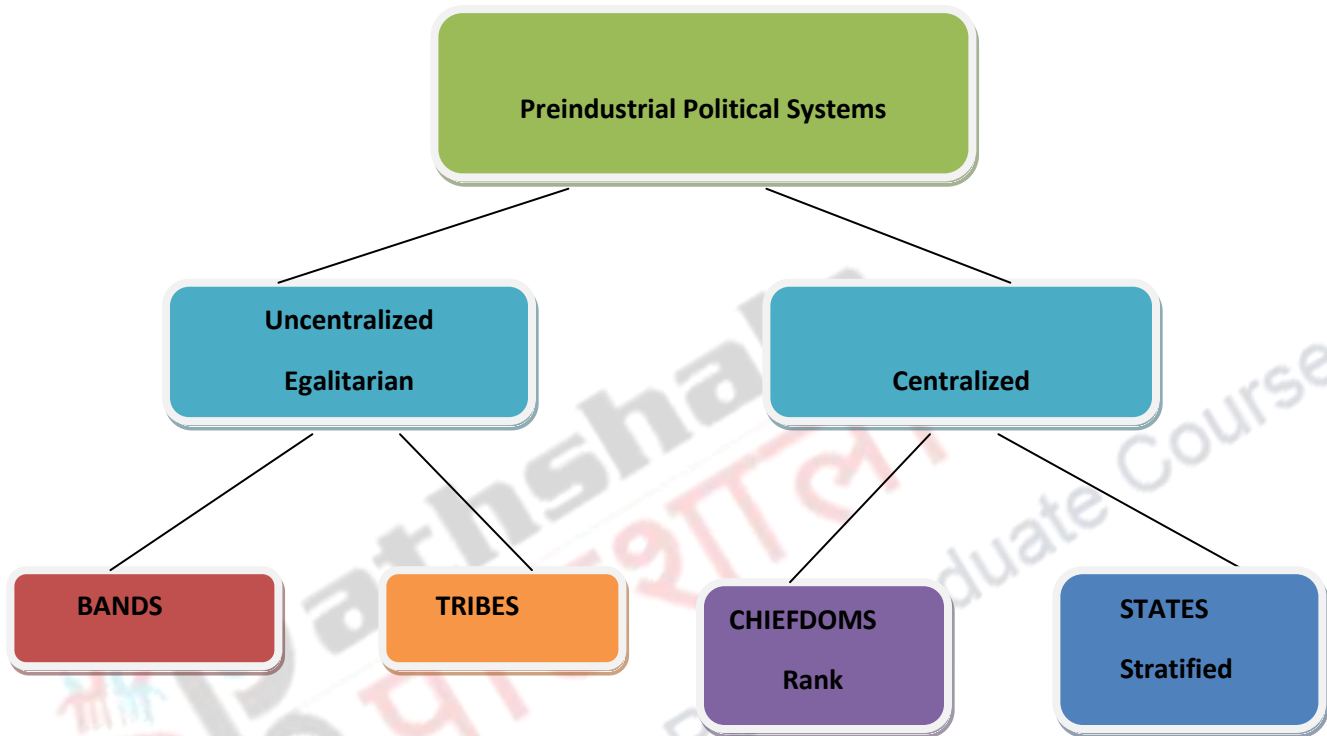
According to Radcliffe Brown, a society is said to be an equilibrium system where separate part functions to perform the maintenance of the whole. Thus, societies were sought to be illustrated from high above, so as to be mapped in order to show, how their various elements intermeshed. This approach mainly focused on those values, principles, norms and ideal structures that forms the skeleton, within which activity takes place. The year 1940, led to the development of modern political anthropology, brought about in a work titled 'African Political Systems' which was edited by Meyer Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard. The work illustrated the two kinds of African political systems prevailing namely (i) those with centralized authority and judicial institutions i.e., (primitive states), and (ii) those without such authority and institutions i.e., (stateless societies) .The main point of discrimination lies with the role of kinship. In case of 'stateless societies', decision making and integration is based at the lowest level on band groups or bilateral family while at the higher level, on the corporate unilineal descent groups. Whereas the 'state societies' are those in which an administrative organization binds or over rides such groups as a permanent form of political structure. Initially the typology faced criticism for being too simple, but how lineages coordinated and functioned politically in several specific societies left a lasting contribution.

1.4 The Neo-Evolutionists

For approximately two decades, England prevailed in political sphere of anthropology whereas in United States, a different kind of political anthropology was seen emerging. Leslie White (1943, 1959) developed complex array of Evolutionism through intensification of agriculture to private ownership, stratification of class, specialization and political centralization. A lot of this was brought in light at much higher level of generality, which led White to the charge of invigorate the nineteenth century Unilinear theory and Julian Steward's(1965) usage of the term 'multilineal evolution' for his theory, only added to validate an unneeded dichotomy. Political anthropologists from American genre based their contexts of change that was basically ecological and materialist. Leslie White conceptualized Evolution on the basis of energy efficiency and technology as a prime mover. Julian Steward's concept of 'cultural ecology' was based upon the concept of cultural core, the subsistence and economic arrangements which determines social structure and ideology. Two major evolutionary works includes Elman Service's Primitive Social Organization (1962) and Morton Fried's The Evolution of Political Society (1967), which were more descriptive rather than causal in their approach.

2. Evolution of Political Societies:

Preindustrial Political Systems



Sources: Eisenstadt 1959; Fried 1967; Service 1971

A four-fold scheme of development of human societies was based on the socio-economic and political-religion parameters, which was suggested by an American cultural neo-evolutionist, Elman Service in the year 1962. The fourfold-scheme is as follows:

- The Band
- The Tribe
- The Chiefdom
- The State

2.1 Uncentralized Systems:

Power in non-state systems is basically fragmented and of temporary in nature, and is scattered between the families, bands, lineages and various associations. At times of emergency during some

threat, such as that of warring neighbours, political groups are then temporarily formed, which are later broken once the problem has been resolved. These social systems are fluid groups which mostly randomly and sometimes seasonally fuse into larger tribal units and then break down into smaller units which may be divisible in themselves.

2.1.1 Band Societies:

The term 'Band' has been described by the anthropologists as a small, egalitarian, loosely-tied social group which are based upon the nearness of its members. Many of the hunting-gathering societies exhibit the simple kinship organization. In such societies, formal means of exchange like a market place and patterns of formal leadership does not exist. Bands typically constitute of 25- 150 individuals and the most usual kind of band organization is developed from a core of familial males, mostly male siblings, who are married to females born and brought up in other band groups. Thus a Band can be termed as 'exogamic' in nature. They are 'undifferentiated' in terms of kinship organization and leadership i.e. both are one and the same entity. The Aruna and Aranda of Australia, the Ona of South America, the Shoshonean Indians of Southern North America, the Semang of Malay, Kung Bushman of Africa, the Birhor and Kadar of India, are some of the examples of patrilineal bands. Elman Service (1971) added another category which is 'Anamalous' band and has an irregular composition and is framed at 'family level' such as the Eskimo. A band has a leader or chief quite unusually. In case of North west coast (American) Indian communities, their ranked leaders are termed as 'chiefs' though this term remains inapplicable otherwise. Schapera (1930:130) states that the Bushman or Bergama chief doesn't hold any penal powers or functions related with judiciary, he only caters to direct and guide the subsistence activities of his fellow people and migrations.

2.1.2 Tribal Level Political System:

A tribe is more complex in structure as compared to the band society, as it accommodates much larger population. Tribes have well-formed kinship oriented units i.e., lineage, clan, moieties, kindred, etc and sodalities i.e., special-purpose non-residential groups instead of centralized and formal institutions. An illustration of sodality is the age-set system, in which a group which initiated together at the time of puberty will form a continuing sodality that would carry out different functions as it passes through certain age levels. Age-set group is often termed as 'Secret society'. Hoebel described it as 'fraternity whose activities and membership are wrapped in secrecy'. This is infrequently observed in North America and Africa where sex-linked roles are highly operative i.e., during the initiation ceremonies or the puberty rites, certain activities are only for the males and others are only for the females. Thus, matters are kept as secret and no one is aware, what is going on the other side. The Mendi and Temrie tribes of Sierra Leone, Northwest Africa are such examples of secret society. In the age-set group, matters of political interest are mainly in the hands of age-set members and their seniors.

2.2 Centralized Systems:

The centralized political systems involve societies in which power and authority exists in one individual or a small group. However, there lies a possibility to predict that these societies will be more densely populated than are bands and tribes and are arranged by class or rank. They will have specialized social and occupational roles and will make use of more productive technology, economies based on centralized redistribution and be more stable in regard to the ongoing socio-political groupings. According to Morton Fried, the point of distinction from the uncentralized systems is mainly, recruitment is based upon the membership in a specific class or in an elite lineage.

2.2.1 Chiefdoms:

In such societies, called chiefdoms, political power resides in a single individual, who either acts alone or in association with the advisory council. Chiefdoms differ from bands and tribes in that, they incorporate a number of small communities in a formal and rather permanent way. On the basis of genealogical closeness to the chiefs, commoners and as well as the nobles take up ranks and level of power and authority. Chiefdoms are mostly unified politically not having the power under single head chief instead are composed of several political units which is headed by its own chief. Within the chiefdoms, chiefs are centralized and permanent who have a higher status, power and authority. The high rank of chiefdoms helps in minimizing internal social conflicts, as the power and authority to take any decisions, settle disputes and punish the wrongdoers. The chiefs are closely related with the economic activities of their subjects by means of the redistributive system of economics. The chief receives the surplus quantity of goods from the subjects, which he later re-distributes by means of communal festivities. The system of redistribution by the chief head helps in ensuring that no individual in the society stays hungry. It also serves in providing through the political domain for the people to express their gratitude and loyalty for their chiefs. The precolonial Hawaiian system from the eighteenth century clearly illustrates the attributes of a chiefdom.

2.2.2 The State :

According to Sigmund Fried (1967:230), holding a 'monopoly of force' is pertinent to the nature of state, other features of state level polity are that the state develops under conditions in which the significance of kinship ties is reduced and the kinship ties serves to mitigate the development of coercive power. A state society is the most formal and complex form of political organization. A state works in a hierarchical manner of political organization which administer many communities within a large geographical zone. A vast range of individual and class interests exists within a state, pressures and conflicts drives some kind of impersonal law, which is assisted by physical sanctions, for the proper handling of the system. The pre-colonial zulu and the Inca empire are few examples of such state.

3 Religion in Politics:

As stated by Georges Balandier (1970:38) the sacred is always present in politics, but it is seldom far away. While Myron Aronoff (1985b:1) sees “Religion and politics have been inextricably interrelated since the dawn of human culture and civilization”. The role that religion plays in politics is challenging to correlate with specific types of religion, such as shamanistic or priestly. The shaman was the most powerful of men due to his high accessibility to the spirit world in case of the Eskimos while among the tribal Hopi of the American south-west, political strength is carried through ceremonies, dances, and religious sodalities. Likewise Modern Saudi Arabia is regarded as an internationally powerful nation-state, intimately based on Islam.

The role of religion in aiding a specific political regime is exhibited basically in three ways:

- As in the case of theocracy, the government may be directly based on religion.
- Religion may have its operation in order to legitimize the ruling elite.
- Religion may provide the beliefs, ideals, traditions and other underlying structures that are manipulated by aspirants to power.

Thus religion can be said to not only help in reinforcing the existing political structures but can also be a source of force of opposition.

4 Tradition and Modernity:

The old ways and forms of political anthropology are declining and transforming, the primitive form of governance and the traditional states are fast declining and transforming themselves. The political variation has started in most of the developing countries and is readjusting the alterations brought about by the colonial dominance. The most outstanding changes are not only the result of recent influences instead have occurred by working for a considerable period of time in a number of traditional societies. They are thus modifying their nature in a more generalizing way. Hence for this very reason, political anthropology can't neglect the dynamisms and historical movements that are transforming the structure and system of institutions, which they are studying and must fast develop dynamic models which are able to make political transformations and recognizing the tendencies for change within the organizations.

Summary:

Political Anthropology mainly concerns with how a person thinks and reasons out politically and how a person acts in a community. Weber (1964:38) describes that power is the strength to limit the behavioural alternatives of other people, which can be brought by means pressure, threat, manipulation, by persuasion or if member of one community understands and accepts other's wish as

just and cordial with his own norms, ideals and values. The Exercise of power can be based upon different power bases i.e. through the presence of armed followers, the access to super natural forces or if one has resources at one's disposal of others requires.

