

Understanding Ethnography: A way to engage with the other
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Lecture No. 2
Module 1: Situating Ethnography

We ended our last session speaking of the need to understand a little bit about sociology and anthropology.

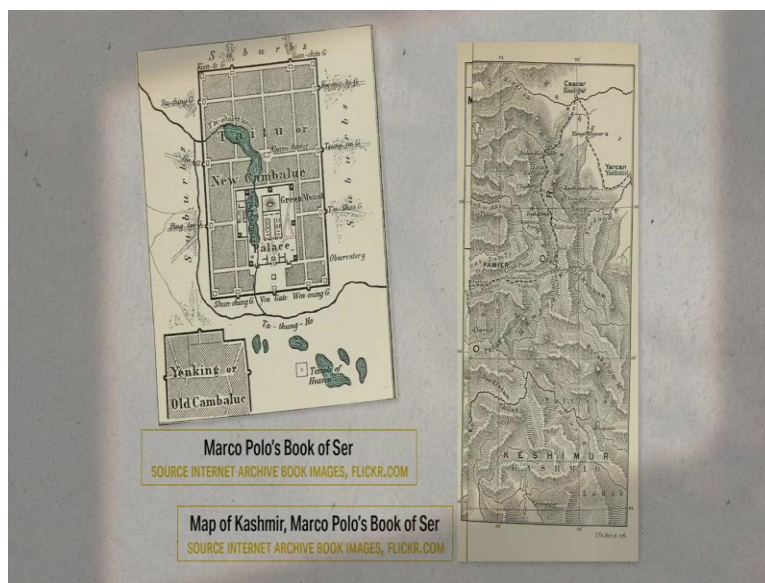
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It is from these domains that ethnography derives its methods as well as its fundamental concepts. In this session, we will look a little bit into the historical aspect of ethnography and these disciplines. The term ethnography and its articulation as a research method did not come about until the 18th century. However, the process of writing about ‘people’ or ‘cultures’ has had a long history.

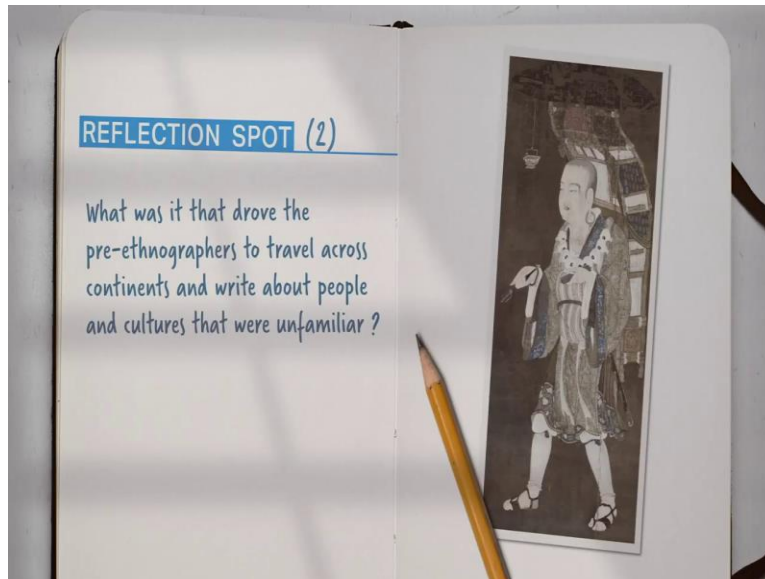
We have accounts of travellers like Huein Tsang, Marco Polo, Al Beruni, Ibn Batuta who may be called the pre-ethnographers or proto-ethnographers. Through their travels, they absorb knowledge about different peoples, cultures and lands.

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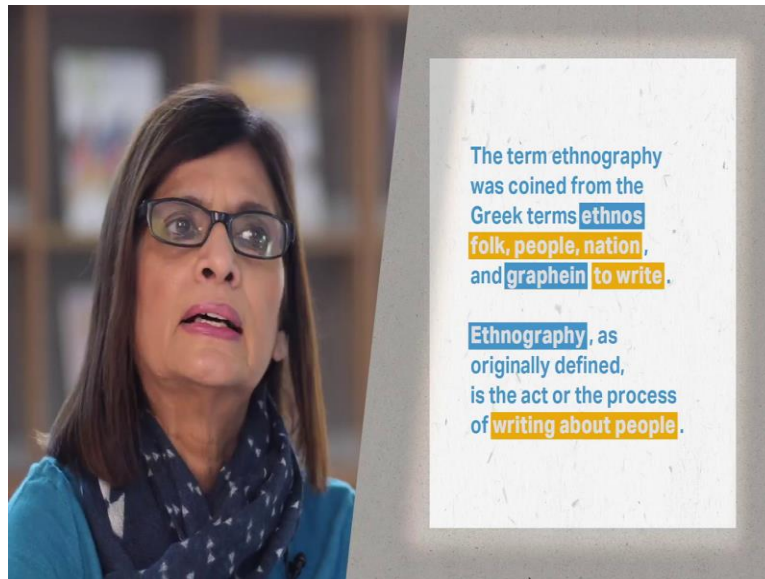
They wrote down and spoke about much of what they had observed and learned. These records were a way to chronicle the worlds and peoples they knew nothing about. Let us pause the video here and reflect for a moment.

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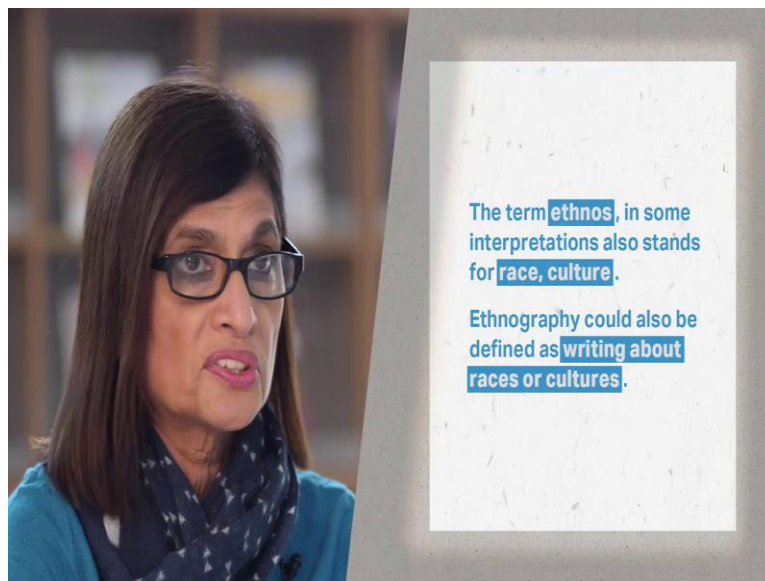


What do you think drove the pre-ethnographers to travel across continents to unfamiliar places and cultures? Some of you may have said that it was the desire to learn about people and ways of being that were different from their own. Some of you may have answered that they were simply curious about other civilisations. They wanted to experience the adventures of travel and then share them with their people or rulers back home. Some others may have guessed that they could have been looking for trade opportunities. To some degree, each of these factors probably inspired and motivated the proto-ethnographers. And it was a similar set of factors that came into play in the 1700s. In this period, another set of traders, scholars, missionaries and travellers, most of them Europeans, wrote about the various peoples, lands and cultures they encountered. It was around this time that the term ethnography was coined.

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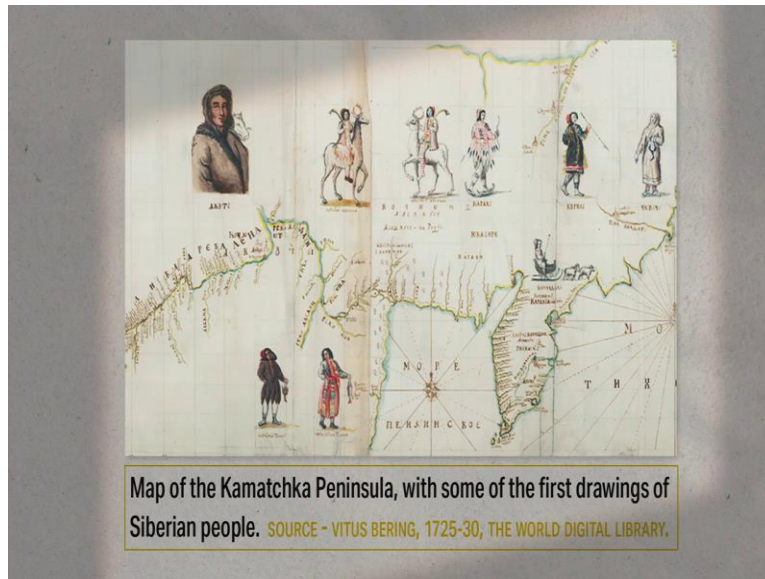


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The choice of the term *ethnos*, which at that time also denoted 'race', was not coincidental.

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This was a period when European nations were trying to explore unmapped parts of the world, such as the Arctic coast of Siberia, or the far east. And some of these expeditions had among them scholars and academics. These people were part of the expedition so that they could gather knowledge about the newfound lands- their geography, and the people who lived there. These expeditions, however, were not simply for gaining knowledge.

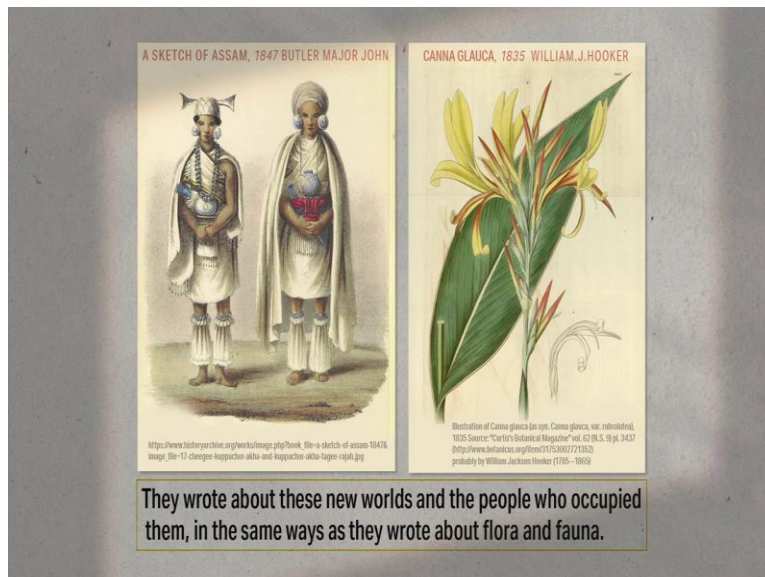
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This was a period of great competition among European mega-corporations such as the Dutch East India Company, the British East India Company and others. Each of them was rivals competing to establish monopolies on trade with Asia, North America and the Middle East. And many of these rivalries translated into colonisation.

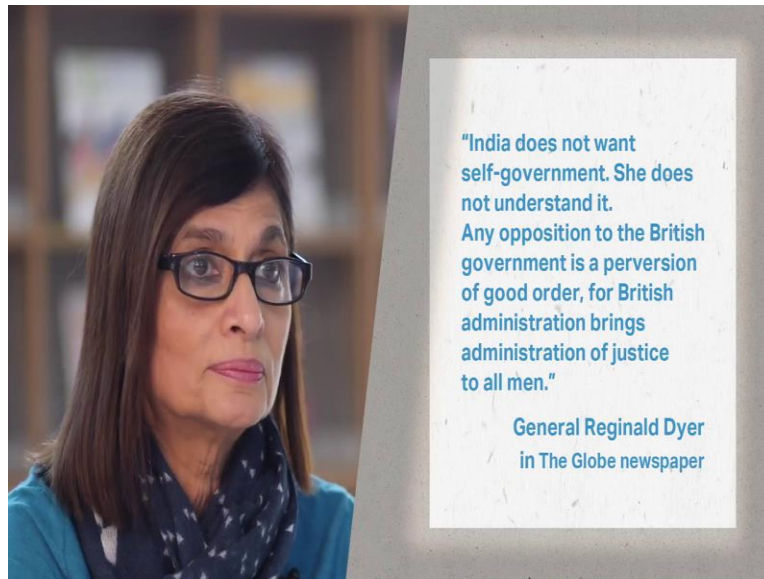
This geopolitics was one of the factors that influenced the kind of ethnographic research that was commanded. Those who commissioned such research felt the need to not only 'discover' but to 'grasp' the unfamiliar world they were encountering, owning it somehow. Some of them did so by *writing* it, in their own words, through their own ways of seeing.

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In fact, often, they wrote about these new worlds and the people who occupied them, in the same ways as they wrote about flora and fauna.

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This kind of ‘scientific’ knowledge was often used by imperialist nations to justify colonisation and subjugation of local populations. Or sometimes, to suggest that European colonisation was good for the natives. They even believed that the presence of white colonisers would help the local culture to move ahead, towards civilisation, development and modernity.

Our practise of ethnography bears some traces of these ideas and methods. That may be our legacy, but fortunately, the discipline has evolved a lot since its early days. Contemporary ethnographers are conscious of the problematic history of the discipline. And so, they work actively towards a form of research which is more respectful and empathetic towards participants.

In its long history, ethnography owes much to two major moments. The first of these is called the Chicago School because that is where it started. And the second is called British Social Anthropology. Both of these emerged in the late 1800s. The focus on ‘description’ that is a key feature of our practice was propagated by the Chicago School. And the focus on theory is credited to the British Social Anthropologists. It is this dual focus that pushes us to construct detailed and nuanced descriptions that lead to an analytical understanding of our participants’ culture.

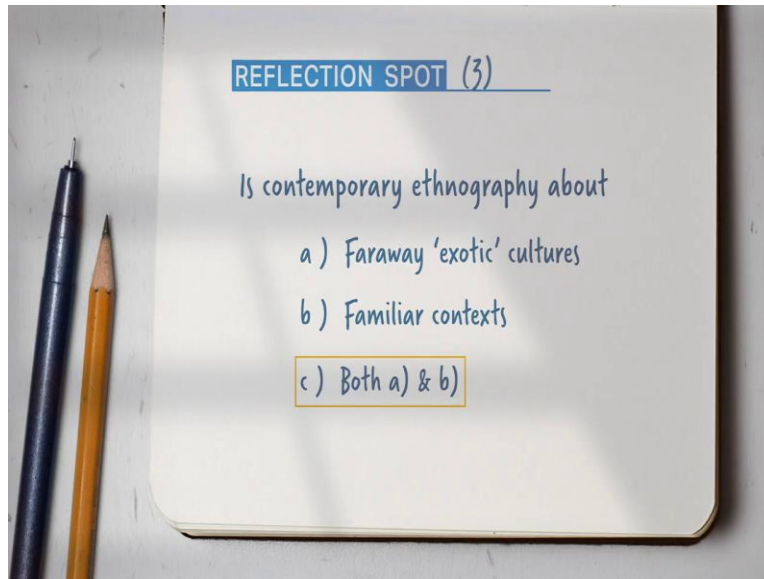
Since the 1970s, there have been further upheavals in ethnographic ways of seeing. And many of these ideas pose a direct challenge to those of ethnography's colonial originators.

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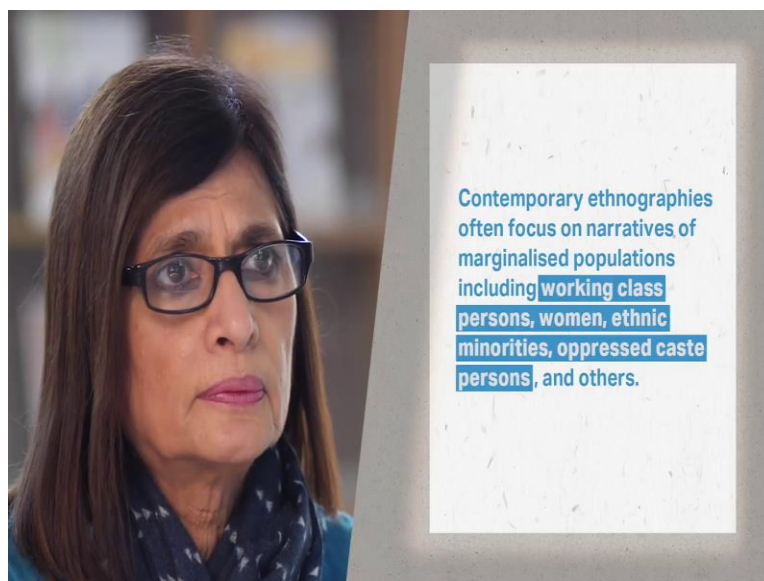
These include ideas such as post-colonialism and feminism. These approaches insist that we use ethnography to tell the narratives of people less heard in society. For those of you who are interested in learning more about the history of ethnography, we have some reading material that you can refer to. And following that, there's a quiz to help you revise and reflect on what you have learnt. Let us pause here and reflect on the question that appears on the screen.

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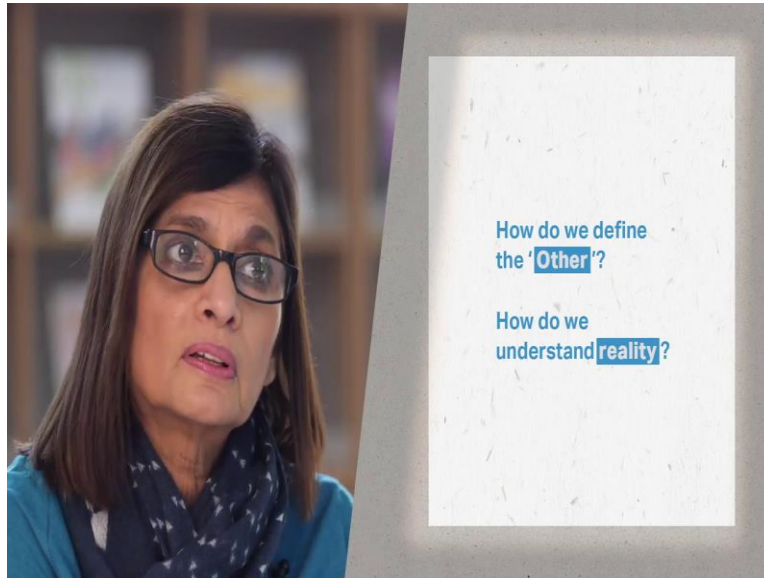
Is contemporary ethnography about faraway exotic cultures, familiar contexts, or both a and b? Some of you may have selected option a). Others may have gone for option b). The correct answer is c). Ethnographic research may be about any culture or community, both familiar and unfamiliar. In fact, today, ethnographies are not so much about faraway 'exotic' cultures, as they are about familiar contexts- like the home, the family, the workplace.

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And often, the focus is on understanding perspectives that have so far been marginalised. This includes the narratives of women, working-class people, ethnic minorities, oppressed caste persons, and so on. So, we see that one of the central premises of ethnography, is this idea of understanding the other, and their notion of reality. On the face of it, both terms seem simple enough.

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But how do we define the other? How do we understand reality? And what it means to different people? In our next section, we will look more closely at these terms and what they could mean.