SECTION- A

1. What is ethnographic writing? Discuss the new trends in ethnographic writing.

Ans: Ethnographic writing is the systematic study of people and cultures. It is designed to explore cultural phenomena where the researcher observes society from the point of view of the subject of the study. An ethnography is a means to represent graphically in and writing the culture of a group.

The word can thus be said to have a double meaning, which partly depends on whether it is used as a count noun or uncountable. The resulting field study or a case report reflects the knowledge and the system of meanings in the lives of a cultural group. As a method of data collection, ethnography entails examining the behaviour of the participants in a certain specific social situation and also understanding their interpretation of such behaviour. Dewan further elaborates that this behaviour may be shaped by the constraints the participants feel because of the situations they are in or by the society in which they belong. Ethnography, as the presentation of empirical data on human societies and cultures, was pioneered in the biological, social, and cultural branches of anthropology, but it has also become popular in the social sciences in general—sociology, communication studies, history—wherever people study ethnic groups, formations, compositions, resettlements, social welfare characteristics, materiality, spirituality, and a people’s ethnogenesis. The typical ethnography is a holistic study and so includes a brief history, and an analysis of the terrain, the climate, and the habitat. In all cases, it should be reflexive, make a substantial contribution toward the understanding of the social life of humans, have an aesthetic impact on the reader, and express a credible reality. An ethnography records all observed behavior and describes all symbol-meaning relations, using concepts that avoid causal explanations. Traditionally, ethnography was focussed on the western gaze towards the far ‘exotic’ east, but now researchers are undertaking ethnography in their own social environment. According to Dewan, even if we are the other, the ‘another’ or the ‘native’, we are still ‘another’ because there are many facades of ourselves that connect us to people and other facades that highlight our differences.

Next, ethnographic studies do not have a hypothesis, which makes it different from most other social science research methodologies that are based on hypothesis. The aim of ethnography is not to test a hypothesis as having one would mean that the researcher has preconceived notions, biases and stereotypes about the culture s/he is studying. In fact, the researcher should go into a culture with no baggage and an empty mind and discover both the question and the answer from the participants, so as to understand the situation from the emic perspective. Further, ethnographers arrive at middle-range grounded theories. These are placed between inductive (reaching conclusion based on observation) and deductive (based on logical or reasonable conclusion drawn from available information) theories. Besides, ethnographers do not try to collect all and every bit of empirical data and describe them. Instead, they interpret data frequently inaccessible through other methodological means and complement data collected through surveys, experiments or other techniques. This interpretation can lead to new concepts and theories. Additionally, ethnography relies on both qualitative and quantitative methods. Ethnographic methods recognise the importance of multiple worldviews and avoid generalisation. The researcher here seeks to unravel cultures and social settings that are generally hidden or difficult to locate. Another important feature of ethnography is the intensity of the relationship between the ethnographer and the field, especially the ethnographer and his/her informants or participants who are part of the social setting that is being studied by the ethnographer. While doing ethnographic study, the researcher spends and lives for extended periods in the field with the people s/he is trying to understand. This results in the formation of intense relationships. Here the ethnographer must adapt to the rules, codes and expectation of the locals. This will be helpful in gaining trust of the people.

2. Discuss the cultural perspectives in writing ethnography.

Ans: The purpose of ethnography is not to test what we know or think we know about a culture. Its main purpose is to explore cultural knowledge. Exploring here would mean first ‘understanding’ and ‘discovering’ the culture, then ‘describing’ it and finally ‘interpreting’ it. Secondly, ethnography describes a culture from the point of view of its participants. This is the insider’s or native point of view, which is referred to as emic perspective. The other perspective is the etic i.e. the outsider’s point of view. In ethnography, the researcher must try to understand the world from the insider’s point of view so as to discover how they see the world and ascribe meaning to it. In this sense, ethnography can then be used as a tool to discover the worldviews of others. Ethnography can be useful in several situations. It can be used as a method to gather research material or to gain an entry point for irrigation or water project or to establish relationship when one is a guest or an outsider in a particular context. Ethnography can also be used by third party intereners for facilitating or mediating in a conflict. Ethnography will help the third party to understand the worldviews of the two parties as conflicts are not just located in the material or social world but also in the symbolic world where worldviews are formed. This will help look into the structural causes of individual and group behaviours as well as be useful in understanding how meaning, symbols and norms contribute to the making and enactment of individual and group behaviours. Parties can also use ethnography to understand each other’s perspectives without the help of a third party.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ETHNOGRAPHY

Ethnography is a unique research method in several ways. There are three fundamental and interrelated presuppositions in ethnography:

- Data is not just gathered but created by human effort, thus how information is collected will eventually affect the content of data;
- Researchers are complex creatures and their perception is shaped not just by the context in which they find themselves but also the level of comfort and discomfort they experience in that context; and
- The researcher and research participants both affect the quality and content of data. Interpretation is an important feature of ethnography and the above presuppositions are based on the premise that human life is about interpretation.

Secondly, ethnography is implicitly ‘comparative’ as while studying another culture the ethnographer needs a reference point to understand the values, beliefs and practices and that reference point most of the time is their own culture. The ethnographer interacts with other cultures and tries to know about their ways of life. This makes them value their own culture. Thus, eventually the ethnographer ends up comparing the culture they are studying with their own culture. Thirdly, this comparison may sometimes make the ethnographer reach the conclusion that their culture is