

# Prof. Bhuban Mohan Das's Contribution in Anthropological Study of North-East India

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**ABSTRACT:** Professor Bhuban Mohan Das was a social scientist of deep veracity, who was innately both a great scientist and a teacher. Professor Das was not only one of the eminent anthropologists in India; he was a litterateur, music lover and passionate traveller. His critical perception and academic achievements won high esteem in India and abroad. It is without saying that Das was impeccable in time management. He was also very particular in methodological process of study of any discipline, which he used to say, everything was his father's legacy.

## EDUCATION & PROFESSIONAL LIFE

Bhuban Mohan Das was born at Panbazar, Guwahati in a family, renowned for scholarly pursuit, on April 1, 1931. His father, Hara Mohan Das was a mathematician of repute, an eminent educationist of Assam. Bhuban Mohan Das completed his school education in Manik Chandra Middle English School in Guwahati and had his college education in Cotton College, Guwahati. He did his graduation in anthropology. Bhuban Mohan Das then shifted to Kolkata and completed his Masters, Ph.D. and D.Sc. degree from University of Calcutta (M.Sc., 1953; Ph.D., 1959; D.Sc., 1973). His Ph.D. supervisor was Dr S. S. Sarkar of Calcutta University. His D.Sc. thesis was published by Field Research Project (FRP), Miami, USA. FRP was founded by Dr Henry Field.

Dr Bhuban Mohan Das began teaching (1954) at Cotton College within few months after receiving his M.Sc. degree. Two years later in 1956, he joined Gauhati University. Dr Das joined Dibrugarh University as a Professor of Anthropology in 1973.

He set up a well-equipped laboratory in the Department of Anthropology, Dibrugarh University. Dr Das returned back to Gauhati University again in 1976, where he was Head of the Department of Anthropology until 1984. He was also Dean of the Faculty of Science at Gauhati University.

Professor Das conducted post-doctoral research at the Institute for Anthropologie, Freie University at, Berlin, during 1968-1970 as Alexander von Humboldt Fellow. In addition to this he conducted post-doctoral research in Institut für Humangenetik, Medizinische Hochschule, and Hannover in 1975. He visited Humbert, Bremen, Peabody Museum (Harvard) for academic purposes. He delivered lectures in different universities as well as Research Institutes abroad. Prof. Das visited Italy in 1982 to deliver lectures at Rome, Florence and Pisa under Indo-Italian Cultural Exchange Programme. Prof. Das had the privilege of working with eminent anthropologists like E.C. Buchi, G. Flatz, H. Walter and others. Prof. Das also had close association with Henry Field and F. Vogel. He was superannuated from

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Gauhati University in the year, 1993.

#### *Academic Recognition*

His important academic recognitions were as follows:

- (i) President, Anthropological Society of North East India (1970-1974);
- (ii) Co-Chairperson in the session "Biological Variation" at the 10<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, New Delhi (1978);
- (iii) President, Anthropology and Archaeology Section, Indian Science Congress (1979);
- (iv) National Lecturer, University Grants Commission, New Delhi (1979-1980);
- (v) President, History Session, Asom Sahitya Sabha, Diphu, Assam (1982);
- (vi) President, Assam Academy for Cultural relations, Guwahati (1982-2008);
- (vii) President, Assam Science Society (1992-1993);
- (viii) Vice-President, Srimanta Sankardeva Kala-Kshetra (1992-2000);
- (ix) President, S. S. Sarkar Society of Human Sciences (1993-2003);
- (x) Chairman, Assam Textbook Production and Publication Corporation (1995-1996);
- (xi) Emeritus Fellow, University Grants Commission (1996-1998);
- (xii) Member, National Commission for Other Backward Classes (2000-2003);
- (xiii) President, Network of Practicing Anthropologists and Related Sciences (2001-2003) and
- (xiv) Founder President, Indian National Confederation and Academy of Anthropologists.

#### RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION

Prof. B. M. Das was of the opinion that, "Basic research is crucial to the understanding of various biological and socio-cultural phenomena which lead to the development of different methodologies for the utilization of the findings for the improvement of

the people and the society. It is needless to emphasize that for the full understanding of a population, anthropologists take into account its biological as well as socio-cultural aspects. To the anthropologists biology and culture are inseparable, one affecting the other. Physical anthropologists can simply provide useful information and suggest measures, but they alone cannot implement the measures. They can join hands with various implementing agencies, including the government, in their effort to serve the people."

Inspired by Professor Birinchi Kumar Barua of Gauhati University and Dr. S. S. Sarkar of Calcutta University Das undertook a study on the variation in different physical characteristics among the Khasis of North East India. In this respect, he tried to present a comprehensive picture of the nature and range of variability in the metric and some genetic parameters in the four divisions of Khasi populations (Khyntiam, Pnar, Bhoi and War). He found that interdivision variability is more in respect of metric characters than in respect of genetic traits. This work was published in book form titled, *Variation in Physical Characteristics in the Khasi Population of North East India*.

Prof F. Vogel in a foreword to the book wrote: "We know much too little about the genetic characteristics of all the human populations, especially the so-called "primitive" ones. However, in order to understand clearly the changes which these populations are bound to undergo in our rapidly changing world we should try to accumulate as much relevant information as possible about their present state. This may help us in the future to recognize possible dangers, and to help people in escaping these dangers, and to live a happy life. In this context, Professor B. M. Das's work on the Khasi must be seen. Through long-lasting and devoted work, he succeeded in drawing a through picture of the physical characteristics of this population, which can now be supplemented by other genetic as well as socio-cultural descriptions and analysis. It is to be hoped that this little book may encourage other anthropologists to carry out similar analysis of other characteristics populations in India and abroad."

According to Prof. Das, the possibilities of genetic diversity, which exist within the human species are enormous. Innovation of modern techniques of

studying the nature and behaviour of genes and advancement of mathematical genetics have equipped the physical anthropologists to explore the new facts of human evolution opening up a new era in anthropology. The fact that evolution is directed by the interaction between cultural components and genetic materials has encouraged collaboration between cultural and physical anthropologists at a research level.

Regarding micro-evolution he mentioned in the book — *Long back in 1957 my teacher Dr S. S. Sarkar of Calcutta University drew my attention to and since then made me interested in this subject of microevolution. I am always very much indebted to my most revered teacher Dr Sarkar.*

In the study of micro-evolutionary dynamics, he examined how ecological differences bring changes in physical features. To conclude his study on micro-evolution Das mentioned that “Advances both in theory and in the accumulation of information through different kinds of researches in the biological sciences, including anthropology, have helped us to understand the trends of evolution; the process by which genetic materials are distributed within populations; and how new varieties of populations can emerge”. He also mentioned that “It is an established fact that mankind evolved. It is demonstrable that mankind is evolving. It is presumable that mankind will continue to evolve”.

During his stay in Dibrugarh University, he conducted research on different haemoglobin variants among the people of North East India in collaboration with Professor Gebhard Flatz, a famous population geneticist.

While working in collaboration with the German anthropologist, Das discovered the existence of HbE variant, which is a common factor among the Kacharis, Tiwas, Rabhas and other Mongoloid tribes of North East India (Boruah, 2005). For a detail idea on population distribution of different haemoglobin gene in North East India we have to remember the great contribution of two great scholars – Professor G Flatz (Germany) and Professor B.M. Das. Later on many scholars joined hand with them in this endeavour namely, Professor Ranjan Deka, Professor H. Walter, Professor H. Delbruck, Professor M.R. Chakravarti, Professor Bijoy Gogoi, Professor K. C. Malhotra and

many others. The presence of HbE in India was first reported by Chatterjee *et al.* (1957). It can be said that the first study on a tribal community was done in 1962 when the Toto, a small tribe of North East exhibited about 23% of HbE. Systematic examination of some tribes of North East was started in 1971. The tribes of North East show HbE in very high frequencies, the frequency ranging from 0.198 to 0.549 (Das *et al.* 1971, 1975, 1980a, 1980b, 1985, Flatz *et al.*, 1972). Till now the frequency of HbE gene in Assam is the highest in the world.

The Caucasoid and Mongoloid are living in the Brahmaputra valley since long past. They are preserving their respective distinctive biological make-up to a great extent. During University Grants Commission Emeritus Fellowship Professor Das undertook a study on, “The Brahmaputra Valley Population”. The study deals with the biological traits of 29 population groups of Brahmaputra Valley, Assam.

Professor Das said (*cf.* Boruah, 2005): “*I am first and foremost an anthropologist and I look at anthropology from a holistic point of view. Thus my interest in unveiling new information about my subject comes naturally to me. I am pointing out the changes in urban areas instead of rural places as urban life has great impact on rural society. Many might question my theory, but as the process of development first touches the cities dissemination of the development process in post-modern era will always flow down from the urban to rural area instead of the cliched belief, from rural to urban.*”

#### Awards Won

Professor Das was the recipient of Annandale Memorial Award of Asiatic Society, Kolkata, in 2004 in appreciation of his contribution to the study of anthropology in Asia.

Das was a national award-winning children's literature. Out of 12 English books and 26 in Assamese, it is the children's literature penned down by his facile pen which makes him a darling amongst his child readers (Boruah, 2005). *Adim Jugar Adi Katha* and *Amar Dore Sihoto Manav* written by Professor Das won the Children's Literature Award in 1995. He used to say, he love spending time in the company of young minds, full of innocence and inquisitiveness.

*Ph. D. Supervisor and Completion of Research Projects*

Professor Das guided about 26 Ph.D. students and completed around 15 research projects sponsored by University Grants Commission and Anthropological Survey of India.

*Books Published by Professor B. M. Das*

Professor Das wrote a book for the students of physical anthropology titled, "Outlines of Physical Anthropology". The first edition of this book came out in 1961. Time to time several additions and alterations were made by him in the book for the benefit of the students. Incorporating some new chapters Professor Das published an enlarged edition of this book in 1988. It is considered as a very useful book for students of anthropology till today. So far 26<sup>th</sup> edition of this book is published and publisher is publishing its Reprint time to time after his death.

It is interesting to note that being a non-political person he was first to head the Assam State Textbook Production and Publication Corporation, as its Chairman for four years.

*Books in English on Anthropology*

1. Outlines of Physical Anthropology (1961)
2. Ethnic Affinities of the Rabha (1960)
3. Kaharpara : A Report on Socio-Cultural Survey (1964)
4. Anthropometry of the Tribal Groups of Assam, India (1970)
5. Variation in Physical Characteristics in the Khasi Population of Northeast India (1978)
6. Micro-evolution (1981)
7. The Peoples of Assam (1987)
8. Contemporary Anthropological Research in Northeast India (edited, 1974)
9. Children of North-East India (edited, 1985)
10. The Brahmaputra Valley Population (1997)

*Books in Assamese on Anthropological Topics*

1. *Manavar Adikatha* (1960)
2. *Adim Jugar Adikatha* (1960)

3. *Vivartanar Pathat Manav* (1961)
4. *Amar Dore Sihoto Manav* (1963)
5. *Vividh Manav* (1968)
6. *Manuh* (1968)
7. *Prathamik Abayabik Nritattwa* (joint author, 1974)
8. *Nritattwar Samu Abhas* (1977)
9. *Manav Gosthi* (1978)
10. *Manav Prajati Parichay* (joint author, 1979)
11. *Prathamik Nridehmaptattwa* (joint author, 1986)
12. *Asomor Manuah: Prajatiaru Sanskriti* (1986)
13. *Asomor Manuh* (edited, 1986)
14. *Manuhe Nakhay Ki* (1988)
15. *Asomiair Ukti* (1993)
16. *Manuhar Parichaya* (1997)

*Other Books in Assamese*

1. *Deutar Katha* (1967)
2. *Athjani Misses* (1973, 1996)

Professor Bhuban Mohan Das passed away on 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 2008.

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