

Review Article

CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND COMMON HUMANITY

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The author of the book under review*, N. Subba Reddy represents the Lucknow tradition of anthropology imbibed from his teacher D.N Majumdar. He played a major role in shaping three anthropology departments at Visakhapatnam, Madras and Hyderabad, and was instrumental in teaching and training generations of students. The availability of most of his publications in a book provides an opportunity to have a glimpse of the kind of anthropology which the author preached and practised. The volume provides an overview of the development of the discipline in terms of the kinds of topics, theories, and methodologies from the vantage point of view of the author.

Anthropology as a discipline has set out to study diverse societies and to explain the similarities and differences between them. What is universal to all humanity has always remained a matter of inquiry for anthropologists. The book titled “Cultural Diversity and Common Humanity” thus represents the core of anthropology. The author covered in his papers major traditional anthropological topics like kinship, jajmani system, caste, village studies, and folk religious practices. Critical assessment of the contributions of stalwarts in anthropology such as Bronislaw Malinowski, Louis Dumont, Margaret Mead, Marvin Harris, and Oscar Lewis formed the best part of the book. There are several equally interesting topics for Non-anthropologists also. Most prominent are the contemporary social issues like Dalit conflict, Other backward classes, Sub-plan, Extremist movement, Secularism, Development-induced displacement, Globalization and Postmodernism. The papers included were those published in various journals, and those written on different occasions for seminars and conferences in India and abroad. It is not possible to do justice to the diverse topics covered in this book in any review. However, an attempt has been made here to have an overview of the contribution made by the author.

Broadly speaking, the contents of the book revolve around concerns relating to human nature and the future of mankind. There are five papers

**Cultural Diversity and Common Humanity*, Subba Reddy N, 2014. New Delhi, Academic Foundation.

that are positioned around the title of the book 'Cultural Diversity and Common Humanity'. In the first paper, the author traces the journey of mankind from 'from animality to humanity'. He delineates how the foundations for the emergence of culture were laid down. After dealing with the core areas of anthropology such as human origins, evolution, diversity and variation, an attempt was made to distinguish pre-human organic evolution and human evolution (in which culture played a crucial role). In doing this, the author offers a critique of the arguments of socio-biologists who argue for the primacy of biology over culture. He dismisses their arguments by saying "they have good data but their explanations bristle with banalities and tautologies (p-36). It is clear that the author does not agree with the socio-biologists as he firmly believes that 'man is unique from other animals in having an innate moral sense and ethical values'. Glimpses of the cultural diversity of humankind are offered in the next paper under the title 'Kaleidoscope of cultures'. A wide range of customs, cognition, kinship, marriage, worldviews has been discussed with empirical substantiation from varied sources. While discussing customs and practices emerging from the interaction between individual and culture, the author reminds us that individual human being is both creator and creature of culture. The paper titled 'Understanding Humans across Cultures', explores the advantages and disadvantages of emic and etic approaches, popularly understood as insider's and outsider's points of view. The importance of meanings, notions, and norms in ethnographic representation has been brought out here. What was written in this chapter can be taken as guiding principles for conducting ethnographic studies; and on how to approach norms and meanings. The task of anthropology has been envisioned by the author as "The delicate task of objectively representing the ideas, meanings, and actions, as acceptable to academics, at the same time not sacrificing the distinctness of the other in terms of indigenous idiom an ethos"(p-102).

The paper titled 'Cultural diversity and common rationality' addresses the question 'whether in terms of rationality, all human groups are alike or there are culture-specific differences?' According to the author, while core rationality is the same, there may be differences of degree but not of kind. For him, rational and rationally non-explainable (mystic) features exist in all societies. Logic across societies is the same, but inferences in simple societies are different due to the weak knowledge base. He is unhappy with the over-emphasis on diversities at the cost of underlining the commonalities. The essence of the author's argument can be seen in the statement that "There is a reason to believe that it is the sloppy studies conducted by anthropologists without proper observation or interpretation, often tendency to exaggerate exotic elements found in alien cultures, that have provided the gist for relativists" (p-171). The author continues with the issue of unity of mankind versus the uniqueness of each culture in the paper titled 'Human nature and man's future'. The discussion on human nature and man's future revolves

around the debates between Relativists and Universalists on common rationality across cultures and rationality specific to given cultural setting. The author takes up the discussion from a wide range of opinions of philosophers, sociologists, and anthropologists about human nature. Two strands of opinion in anthropology about man i.e. those subscribing to psychic unity, and those to cultural determinism have been analyzed. The author stresses on the primacy of cultural norms and gives his definition of human nature as “Generic human nature is the pro-social propensity which entails norm-governed behaviour, and in the process gives rise to culture” (p-198).

According to the author, without social bonds and norm-governed behaviour, man will not remain human. While giving importance to the role of the family in ensuring social and cultural stability, he does not approve new types of families and living arrangements. For him, only a stable family and an integrated society can produce a stable citizen. Human nature as a bridge between nature and culture responds to culture and the core value of humanity is altruism. If morality and altruism form fundamental human qualities and are basic to human nature, how to explain deviance, crime etc. is the question to be answered. The author opines that it is sheer escapism to blame social environment as it is also a product of humans. It is humans and their actions that are responsible for deviance. The explanation of the author is that “the dependent and independent factors i.e. cultural factors and generic human nature have become interdependent in the course of constant interaction. The environment which is created by man himself can make him either noble or ignoble, moral or immoral, altruistic or self-governed, cruel or gentle. This implies that man’s decisions and actions either premeditated or unpremeditated, impact on his nature and on his future”. He suggests that diversity of cultures cohere with common core human nature, and they both will flourish in conditions of liberty, equality, and concern for others. Prolonged oppression, widening inequalities, exploitation of people and nations are not in the interest of the future of humanity. Thus the author gives a call to all intellectuals to reflect upon what kind of future they want for humanity.

Altogether, there are nine theoretical and methodological essays in this book. The author reveals zero tolerance to what he considers as “fanciful” theories. He is strongly critical of the mediocre arguments and weak conceptualizations. He systematically dissects the methodology of such works and demolishes the interpretations in a logical fashion. At several places in the book, we see a powerful critique of the works of well-known anthropologists for the absence of empirical substantiation; lack of methodological rigour; and sweeping generalisations. Subtle humour and sarcasm are integral to the discussions and analysis. The author launches an authoritative attack by making extensive use of the literature, facts, and logic. He undertook a critical analysis of the works of renowned scholars of anthropology like Levi-Strauss, Louis Dumont, and Clifford Geertz for critical analysis. The titles of some of

the essays clearly reveal the author's purpose and concerns:

The dust storms weathered by the functionalist edifice of Malinowski

Dumont's desperation for valorizing affinity

Scientific imagination and literary fantasy in Geertz's interpretive anthropology

Post-modernism and anthropology Aberration or Apocalypse

The essence and evanescence of Dravidian kinship system

On the Mead-Freeman controversy, the author is supportive of Margaret Mead's work. He criticises Freeman for biases, prejudices, motives, dubious methodology and lack of ethics. For the author, it is not the credibility of Mead's ethnography but it is of credibility of Freeman that is in question. The author examines the functionalist framework of Trobriand study looking into how different scholars assessed the work and points out the resultant distortions and misjudgments'. He offers a spirited defence of Malinowski and his functionalism and tells us to understand the work of Malinowski without getting distracted by his critics and admirers. To put it in his own words 'to read Malinowski without blinkers, coloured lights and screens'. While thoroughly approving functionalism of Malinowski, the author does not approve the structuralism of Levi-Strauss. He summarily discredits Levi-Strauss in the paper titled 'Conscious and unconscious models, by saying "It appears that there is no point which he cannot prove and there is no point which he cannot disprove (including the one he might have proved previously in another context)". The structural method is critiqued by saying "Levi-Strauss's method is maladroit. He starts with a series of contrived propositions and then chops and hews the data in a procrustean manner to fit into his theoretical frame" (p-219).

Pointing out several contradictions in the paper on the thick description, the author is critical of the interpretive method of Clifford Geertz. He compares Geertz to an astronaut who gazes down on earth and reads the minds of people through telepathy. The work of Geertz is labelled as literary fantasy as it lacks validation and verifiability. Empirical method, logic, and verifiability are the canons dearer to the author. It is on these counts, the author critically comments on the cultural materialistic scheme taking up the "holy cow debate' as an illustration.

The paper on 'Village Studies' provided insights on how to select a typical village for sociological studies. The author begins the discussion with the often debated question of representativeness in village studies. How villages are selected, diversities of villages and different viewpoints have been examined. Culminating the discussion, he suggests for identifying a regional pattern in terms of a combination of factors and assess the degree of representativeness of the identified villages. After the selection of the village in this fashion, one

should proceed with the intensive study of the village as per the goals of the study. In another paper, the author brought out the idea that Village deities as an early stratum of religion.

Current topics of social and political and policy ramifications have been part of the coverage of the volume. The paper titled 'Globalization- Humanistic concerns' takes us to the relevance of anthropology in the wake of globalisation. For the author, Globalization is characterized by the coming together of diverse cultures and nations and the growing culture of consumption. Though globalisation has been an age-old phenomenon in the form of diffusion of ideas and practices, the present form is different as one has to think of paying royalties for making use of these ideas and practices. The author is uncomfortable with the way in which the processes of globalisation are unfolding and questions the free market economy envisaged in the wake of globalization. He affirms that unregulated or free market is a myth as it never existed. Even the growth of capitalism owes to state interventions and support in varying degrees. Pointing out to the adversities faced by poorer nations in competing with others in the free market economy, the author highlights the impact of globalisation on weaker sections such as threats poised to intellectual property rights of indigenous people and the growth of inequalities. In the paper titled 'Social Science perspectives on globalisation and equitable world order,' the author covered the issues in the current debate on economic reforms and social justice from the viewpoint of an anthropologist. Here, the author traces the rise of volatile situations such as unrest and terrorism in different parts of the world and attributes them to the growing disparities and imbalance in ethnic and economic factors. He pleads for an egalitarian society pointing out that "Inequality sets man against man, while equality builds cordiality and mutual confidence" (P, 137). His egalitarian society is not the Marxist version, but one with the right type of social integration. By pronouncing that the goals of equality do not mean bringing about uniformity in cultures, the author suggests the relevance of diversities. In doing this the author gets into economic history and certain basic propositions of economists right from Adam Smith to Joseph Stiglitz. A concern has been expressed that growing inequalities in income and wealth and the resulting social unrest in the wake of globalisation are harmful to human well-being with a suggestion on the need for appropriate public intervention.

Delineating the origin of the Post-modernist project as a reaction to certain conditions, the author dealt with the features of post-modernism and the criticism of post-modernists on ethnographic practice. Comparing pre-modernists and post-modernists the author critically examines the tenets of post-modernism. Underlining post-modernism as a disastrous deviation, he cautions anthropologists against joining the 'fancy bandwagon'. The priority for the author is order and coherence against fragmentary knowledge and individualism which are essential components of post-modernism

Discussing the importance of family, the future of families and future families, the author questions 'technically can these forms be called as families? For him, three dyads of relations: conjugal, paternal and maternal are essential for an entity to be called family. He does not approve single-sex families, female-headed dyads, and single households and feels that they are deviant forms of family. The author strongly emphasises the importance of saving the institution of family for safeguarding the future of mankind. His intention of safeguarding family is not to perpetuate gender inequalities but to make the family stable and less fragile

The policies and strategies for poverty eradication have ended up as a failure due to the narrow focus on income generation and provision of amenities. According to the author, these are taken up without the comprehension of what the author labels as 'culture of poverty'. In the paper, he starts with the distinction between poverty and culture of poverty, its features, conditions under which culture of poverty evolves, and the measures to overcome it. Poverty gives rise to conditions which tend to perpetuate poverty. The example given for this is the extension of short-term loans to the poor by money lenders at usurious rates of interest. On the other hand, poverty leads to a style of life and community ethos among the poor serving as mechanisms to cope up with poverty. Therefore according to the author, sustainable reduction of poverty requires redressing the conditions that perpetuate poverty, and the use of institutions of self-help and community action among the poor. The discussion on the culture of poverty takes the readers to Indian slums, rehabilitation of slum dwellers. Here the inadequacy of amenities based approach which ignores the quality of community life is highlighted. The author stresses the need to pay attention to healthy social life and community life, its coherence and internal harmony; along with measures for poverty eradication.

On the thorny issue of secularism in India, the author says "any label we use should reflect the plurality of our society and the inclusiveness of our culture". Dealing with contemporary debates on the term Hindutva, he favours *Bharatiyata in its place*. He draws the attention of the majority community to what Vivekananda said 'Hinduism sees all religions to be true' and suggests that this should continue to be the worldview of our national culture. The discussion on secularism raises the question of whether secular is antagonistic to sacred/ religion. The author considers secularism as practising one's own religion, respecting all religions while not hurting the sentiments of others through one's own actions. Secular foundations have been enshrined in the Indian constitution but actual practice by national leaders led to the erosion of secular values and suggests for disqualifying those without secular credentials from contesting elections. He is for radical secularism i.e. secularism as a new religion. In this context, he makes a very provocative statement that "Evidently a mistaken notion is developing that if one is to be counted progressive, he should always express himself against majority community in favour of the

minority community, whatever may be the context” (P,133). He opines that anthropologists and sociologists should bring out existing harmony from field studies.

The author examined the debates initiated by Prof. Amartya Sen in the 1960s on the efficiency of small farms and the inverse relation between farm size and productivity per acre in India. Starting with a discussion on reduction in the size of holdings, he explains the marginalisation in terms of demographic pressure and partition of holdings. The author traces the rise of agriculture mechanisation over three decades and its consequences such as reduction in the number of small farms as benefits of technology have gone to well to do farmers. From the methodological point of view, the inquiry is significant in using both micro and macro level data. The author opines that a farm-size of 10-25 acres is likely to be economically viable under the existing technology. He established the need for ensuring productivity consistent with equity. What we see in this discussion is a suggestion for equity for safeguarding small and marginal farmers in the wake of new technology. He gave pragmatic suggestions for policymakers for making available modern technology like tractors to small and medium farmers and establishing service cooperatives for small and marginal farmers.

Caste received maximum attention in the studies on Indian society. In the present volume, there are four articles on caste dealing with essential dimensions of the phenomenon such as the origins of caste, Jajmani system, conflicts among Dalit communities, and other backward classes (OBCs). The focus of the paper on backward classes is explicitly laid down in the title ‘Backward class in India the way the Mandal Commission went about its work and the anomalies followed’. The author criticized the survey conducted by Mandal commission and pointed out flaws in the methodology of using six arbitrarily selected criteria for identification of backward classes. The flaws indicated are: projecting from 1931 census figures, conducting a survey in local areas and projecting those figures to all India level, indiscriminate lumping of disparate groups (such as nomadic and denotified communities) as OBCs, and considering satellite castes of Scheduled Castes as OBCs. He pointed out the internal variation existing among OBC in terms of social economic and educational disparities and advocated categorization of the OBCS.

There have been several theories on the origin of caste. Anthropologists considered tribal societies as egalitarian societies who adopted caste-like hierarchy through contacts with caste populations. They took recourse to concepts like tribe-caste mobility and tribe-caste continuum to explain similarities in practices of castes and tribes. Deviating from such conjectural accounts on origins of caste, the author provides an insight into the origin of the complex institution based on grassroots level data. He indicated that the caste-like system evolved in the multi-tribal villages of Paderu agency of Andhra

Pradesh as necessary conditions existed there. He denied the role of contact with non-tribals in the formation of caste-like hierarchical structures by saying "The society has developed all the essential characters of the caste system which has neither been imposed nor is being maintained by external agency..... It is purely an indigenous growth". Thus the author is in agreement with those who argue on the multiple origins for the pan-Indian phenomenon of caste.

The working of the jajmani system (functional relations) has been analysed in one of the papers with the help of the author's study among Lohars in a north Indian village. Dealing with caste conflicts among Dalits, the author provides a rich ethnography on the community, the mythological basis and occupational differentiation of the internal divisions. He explained how the conflicts between the internal divisions are exploited by upper castes. The frustration existing among the communities which are reflected in crime, conflict, tensions, and behaviour has been pointed out. This paper is very relevant to understand the present day conflicts among communities and demands for Dalit categorization.

Five papers have been included in this book on tribal development and related issues dealing with development programmes and their implementation by official machinery, Implementation of sub-plan approach, displacement and rehabilitation issues, and extremist movement. The paper titled 'Tribal and the official' incisively examines the implementation process of development programmes based on the author's field studies. He provides us with a number of instances pointing to the various drawbacks such lack of understanding and communication and monotonous uniformity of programmes. He urges the officials and administrators to anticipate the short term and long term consequences of the programs under implementation.

The analysis of Naxalite movement in Parvatipuram agency of Andhra Pradesh systematically dwells into the origin of the problem dealing with the tribal setting, the chronology of events and the strategy of Naxalites in mobilising people. This discussion is both descriptive and analytical, in tracing the rise and fall of a historic phase of the Naxalite movement. While the basic issue is that of land alienation and exploitation of tribal people by non-tribals; tribals losing confidence on government machinery due to failed development projects aggravated the situation. The author delineated the rise and fall of the movement in the following manner: In the early stages of the movement when Naxalites were raiding the non-tribal houses for food and the tribals got benefited. Later, when the focus of the raids shifted towards the collection of cash and gold, the tribals were not benefiting from it. The movement alienated the tribals when the Naxalites killed the tribals identified by them as informers and deserters. The tribals could not palate killing their own brethren as part of the movement The movement was finally crushed under the might of

government.

In the paper titled "Tribal sub-Plan approach in Andhra Pradesh", the dilution of sub-plan approach has been traced out. The author pointed out instances of implementation of meaningless programmes; sectorial allocations on population percentage basis leading to expenditure not relevant to the needs of the people; converting non-plan expenditure to plan outlay by announcing new schemes and giving new names to old schemes. While the basic idea of sub-plan approach i.e. planning from below is given up of, funds are controlled by line departments and not by the tribal welfare department which resulted in diversion and dilution. The paper pleads for compensatory allocation for the backwardness of tribal areas.

The author took up the examples of Narmada project, and National testing range at Balipal while writing about the key issues in Displacement and Resettlement. Highlighting the problems of project affected persons, he pointed out the administrative callousness and indifference to the plight of people. The suggestion is for a people-centred approach with a caution that unless better living conditions are ensured to displaced people, rehabilitation is bound to be a failure. In the context of two controversial projects (Bauxite mining in Visakhapatnam district, and Polavaram project on Godavari river) planned in the tribal areas of Andhra Pradesh state, the author raises the issues related to tribal land rights, dilution of land alienation legislations and perfunctory resettlement of the displaced tribals. Along with a comprehensive Relief and Rehabilitation Policy, the author suggests for bringing the tribal areas affected by the Polavaram project under the VIth schedule of the Indian constitution. This clearly shows the pro-tribal leanings of the Author.

Sum Up

An assemblage of essays ranging from traditional interests to contemporary topics, this book provides an overview of the contribution of Prof. N. Subba Reddy to the understanding of human diversity and its concerns. The reader's attention is drawn towards understanding human diversity, concern for the future of mankind, the need for fundamental moral values, and a commitment to marginalised sections. In a good number of papers, the author gave equal importance to applied aspects and policy insights along with theoretical, conceptual and methodological issues of social sciences. A judicious mix of micro-level observations and their macro-level ramifications is integral to all papers. The author strongly rejected the arguments that lack logical rigour and consistency and deficient in factual basis. We see a thorough and in-depth understanding of texts by the author from which he derives interesting insights by going into the facts in minute details. The readers get interesting insights such as that Adam Smith who wrote the celebrated book 'titled 'Wealth of Nations' much before Economics crystallised as a discipline, and that Adam

Smith was a teacher of ethics and moral philosophy. What adds to the extreme readability of the book is a large number of appropriately inserted interesting anecdotes and field-based observations.

This book is like a refresher course for young researchers on how to read research publications with a purpose, write-up research coherently, combine empirical data with abstract arguments, and criticise with valid substantiation. There is a strong message on not to get carried away by catchy concepts, fashionable and implausible theories. Most important is the focus on role and responsibilities of the social scientist in the present day scenario of divisive trends, unstable families, disintegrating social fabric, declining moral and ethical values. After reading this book, one cannot but admire the author for his scholarship, commitment to humanistic concerns and academic rigour.