

T. C. Das Sitting in the Armchair: The Other Side of the Fieldworker Anthropologist

ABHIJIT GUHA[†]

*Institute of Development Studies, Kolkata,
27/D, DD Block, Sector 1, Bidhannagar,
Kolkata 700064, West Bengal*
E-mail: abhijitguhavuanthro@rediffmail.com

KEYWORDS: T. C. Das. History of anthropology. Professional ethnographer. Armchair anthropology. Indian anthropology. West Bengal.

ABSTRACT: Tarak Chandra Das is still known as one of the best ethnographers of the pioneering generation of anthropologists in India. His field based study on the Purum Kukis of Manipur (1945) had attracted the attention of quite a good number of anthropologists in India and abroad including Claude Levi-Strauss, Rodney Needham and Surajit Sinha. Under the initiative of Surajit Sinha, a restudy of the Purums was undertaken by a team of anthropologists from the Anthropological Survey of India during the early 1980s. Das was also successful in conducting team fieldwork which was exemplified in his published research on Bengal famine (1949) and that was repeatedly referenced by the Nobel Laureate economist Amartya Sen in his famous book *Poverty and Famines* (1999). Interestingly, apart from his success as a meticulous ethnographer and an excellent teacher, Tarak Chandra Das was also a brilliant armchair anthropologist in his time. In this paper, I have chosen five anthropological publications of Das, which were neither the result of his own fieldwork nor attempts towards the construction of ethnographies. In these important publications, the role of T. C. Das as an ethnographer was switched over to the role of an armchair anthropologist. In these articles, Das made sincere efforts to provide, (i) explanations for the existence of a culture complex around a food item; (ii) role of anthropology in nation building; (iii) policy critique of a legislation; (iv) a futuristic vision on an institution in a nation state; and (v) a comparative and macro view of the religious beliefs of the Indian tribes.

INTRODUCTION

T. C. Das is still remembered for his ethnography on the Purum Kukis of North-east India. His brilliant monograph *The Purums: An Old Kuki Tribe of Manipur* published in 1945 by the Calcutta University became one of the major sources of database in the acrimonious debate on descent versus alliance theories on kinship in Anglo-American anthropology which

involved mavericks like Claude Levi-Strauss, George Homans, David Schneider, Rodney Needham, Floyd Lounsbury and others.

The Indian anthropologists too continued their ethnographic enterprise on the Purum on behalf of the premier governmental institution of the country – the Anthropological Survey of India. A team of anthropologists were sent to the field area where Das conducted his ethnographic observations during 1931-1936 and a book was published entitled *Proceedings of the Symposium on Purum (Chote) Revisited* in 1985 as an outcome of a symposium in which about 20

[†] Senior Fellow, ICSSR

Retired Professor, Vidyasagar University,
Midnapore 721102, West Bengal

anthropologists and two educated members of the tribe participated and presented their views/papers on the Purums (Das Gupta *et al.*, '85). Vidyarthi in the first volume of his book *Rise of Anthropology in India* described in detail about the findings of Das in the different chapters of the monograph with much admiration for its meticulousness and penetrating analyses. (Vidyarthi, '78:77-81). For Vidyarthi, with the publication of the Purum book T. C. Das 'set an example of a systematic presentation of ethnographic data' (Vidyarthi, '78:80).

Surajit Sinha for example, in one of his articles 'Is there an Indian tradition in social/cultural anthropology: retrospect and prospects', published in the *Journal of the Indian Anthropological Society* in 1971 had mentioned, "T. C. Das tried to rigorously develop field methods which could be fruitfully utilized in describing the living conditions of tribals, peasants as well as urbanites. He felt convinced that anthropological method of detailed contextual observation would be of immense help in social reconstruction" (Sinha, '71: 7).

In a later paper 'India: A Western Apprentice' published in a book edited by Stanley Diamond in 1980, Sinha included T. C. Das among one of the few exceptional Indian anthropologists who could strike his attention for the "rigorous utilization of the genealogical method in the study of Purum social organization" and that was all about Das's contribution in the article (Sinha, '80: 278). Surajit Sinha's most interesting tribute to T. C. Das is found in a book edited by Sinha himself. The book entitled *Field Studies on the People of India: Methods and Perspectives* (Sinha, '78) was the outcome of a seminar held during 24-25 March 1972 in Calcutta that was dedicated in memory of Professor Tarak Chandra Das. While introducing the seminar, Sinha placed on record the reason behind dedicating the academic exchange in memory of his teacher. For Sinha, T. C. Das was the "most devoted specialist in tribal ethnography and a great teacher who was ever experimenting with methods for training the students in fieldwork" (Sinha, '78: xi). Sinha then illustrated his statement from the 'Introduction' of the *Purum* monograph by Das in which one finds a detailed account about the method of data collection and also about the "kinds of informants and interpreters". Only one sentence is

written by Sinha about *Bengal Famine* in the paragraph: "The same rigour of precise information is again there in his famous study on Bengal Famine, 1943 (1949)".

We do not find any detailed assessment of the theoretical and policy implications of the contributions of T. C. Das by Surajit Sinha in his papers mentioned in the foregoing discussion.

In a more recent period, André Béteille in his autobiographical memoir entitled 'Ourselves and Others', published in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* (2013; 42:1-16) recalled his experiences of studying anthropology at the University of Calcutta in the following manner. I quote Béteille, "Things in the Department of Anthropology were organized on a small scale, and they moved at a slow pace. The teachers were easily accessible to their students. One of those who taught us about society and culture, Mr. T. C. Das, was meticulous and conscientious and had a vast store of detailed ethnographic knowledge."

T. C. Das therefore, remained a meticulous ethnographer in the assessment of his famous student successors in the history of Indian anthropology. Let me now narrate my reading of Das from a different perspective. Viewed from this angle Tarak Chandra Das seemed to me to be an armchair anthropologist as well who through his perceptive reading of texts produced useful anthropological interpretations of society and culture.

AN ARMCHAIR ANTHROPOLOGIST

Fish Article

I will first take up the remarkable article of T. C. Das on fish published in *Man in India* during 1931-32. Das wrote this magnificent armchair paper entitled 'The cultural significance of fish in Bengal' by reading a good number of early ethnographic accounts, gazetteers, travel accounts and Sanskrit texts. Not that Das at that time did not realise the importance of fieldwork in anthropology. In fact, he conducted intensive fieldworks among the Hos of Seraikella and published his ethnographic monograph on the tribe jointly with Anathnath Chatterjee in 1927 and by 1931 he published his field based ethnographies on Bhumij and Kharia. In the fish article, Das made an attempt

to analyse the fish trait-complex of Bengal and while doing this he moved through the literature all over the Indian subcontinent. Another interesting aspect of this article is Das here tried to search the spread of fish culture-complex among the Indian population in terms of the association of head shapes with fish culture-complex.

The 1941 Science Congress Lecture

The year 1941 can be regarded as a major turning point in the academic career of T. C. Das. In 1941, he delivered the Presidential address to the Indian Science Congress in its Anthropology Section meeting. The lecture was a 28 page full-length paper entitled 'Cultural Anthropology in the Service of the Individual and the Nation'. This paper can be regarded as one of the pioneering articles on applied anthropology in India, although neither L. P. Vidyarthi nor Surajit Sinha mentioned about this significant article in their works on the application of anthropology in the Indian context (Sinha, '71; Vidyarthi, '78).

In the Presidential address Das elaborately charted out the future path of Indian anthropology with a rich description of the social dynamics of the tribal and peasant societies in India in the context of the role of anthropologists in nation building.

We would now turn our attention to the lecture of T. C. Das. In this lecture Das's major objective was to convince his readers about the immense potential of social-cultural anthropology as applied science for the overall development of the Indian population. In the five subsections of the lecture, Das dealt with the application of anthropology in almost all the important sectors of a modern nation, viz. trade, industry, agriculture, legislation, education, social service and administration. With the help of concrete empirical findings either from his own field experiences or from the ethnographic accounts of world renowned social anthropologists (e.g., Lucy Mair, Felix Keesing, Issac Schepera, H. I. Hogbin, B. Malinowski) Das justified the inclusion of anthropologists in policy making bodies and application of anthropological knowledge in every sphere of nation building (Das, '41:1-29). In order to substantiate his arguments, Das had used rather unconventional sources of data, like Mahatma Gandhi's 1937 article published in *Harijan* about the

adverse effects of the methods adopted by the Christian missionaries to convert the economically poorer classes of the Hindu population in different parts of India¹.

Bengal Dowry Restriction Bill

There are notable and almost unknown studies made by Das on subjects rarely taken up seriously by the anthropologists. One such study by Das was on Bengal dowry restriction bill published in *The Modern Review* in 1941. This paper was first read at the meeting of the Anthropological Society, Calcutta University, which dealt with the 'Bengal Dowry Restriction Bill of 1940'. Here Das argued in favour of conducting proper sociological studies before introducing new legislation, which in his opinion might have caused unwanted effects in these intricate and complex social matters. Apart from pointing out the hurried manner by which the new social legislation was brought up Das also pointed out their elitist nature. For example, the makers of the Bengal Dowry Restriction Bill were mainly interested to eradicate the social problems caused by dowry only among the high caste Hindu girls. The arguments levelled by Das against the 'Bengal Dowry Restriction Bill, 1940' placed by Mr. S. N. Biswas, a Member of the Legislative Assembly, were not only pragmatic but they also contained Das's deeper socio-economic understanding about the nature and evolution of the institution of dowry among the higher castes in Bengal. I go into the details of Das's arguments against the so-called progressive Bill which began with Section 3 of the Bill which he quoted,

"No person shall any time offer or accept any dowry whose money-value exceeds the sum of rupees fifty-one."

But interestingly, in the explanation of Section 3 it was stated and again quoted by Das runs as follows — "[rupees fifty-one] shall not include the value of ornaments or any other thing in kind given by the bride's parents or guardian of the bride as a gift of free will."

According to Das, Section 3 and its explanation are self-contradictory. In his words, "Instead of fixing the bridegroom-wealth in terms of coined money they will fix it up in terms of ornaments having so many tolas of gold and thereby they will remain as ever, causing the same mischief which is attributed to it.

Mr. Biswas, however, will earn the blessings of the goldsmiths, who are the only people to be benefited by this piece of legislation” (Das, '41: 590).

Unlike anthropologists who remained satisfied with micro-level ethnographic studies of one or two tribes, Das in this paper ventured into one of the most difficult macro-level social problems of the caste society and initiated debates with the policymakers from an anthropological perspective. In this paper, Das made a novel attempt to analyse the dowry system from the culture-historical as well as economic angles. He succinctly pointed out that dowry payments were mainly confined to the upper castes and was related to a number of social factors, like lesser economic role of women, joint family, cultural notion of the purity of blood (*kulinism*), inferior social status of women and absence of conjugal love in contracting marriage. Side by side, as Das observed, the payment of bride-price was prevalent among the lower socio-economic groups of the Hindu society for purely economic reasons. I quote him, “The bride-wealth among the Goalas, Kumhars, Kaibartas, Tantis and such other castes, among whom the women play an important part in their or industry, is higher than among other castes of similar social and economic status. This is directly due to the contributions they make towards the family fund. The women in these communities are producers of wealth and the transference of their services from the family of origin to that of the husband therefore entails payment according to the broad principles of economics. The play of these natural forces is not hampered in these groups by artificial laws” (Das, '41: 593).

The arguments pursued by Das against the then Bengal Dowry Restriction Bill however should not lead us to conclude that he was in favour of continuing dowry and bride-price. He simply suggested like a mature social scientist that the problem encountered was more complex than viewed by the policymakers and its solution required an ‘intensive study of type-specimens of the different socio-economic groups according to modern approved methods by competent social anthropologists’.

Museums

This article is entitled ‘Practical steps towards the improvements of museums in India’(1943) is

unique because in this article Das developed the idea of building ‘Economic Museums’ in which anthropologists and other scientists would work for the economic development of the people. Interestingly, one of T. C. Das’s students, Dr Sachin Roy, in his Presidential address “Museum of Man – A Mirror of India’s Cultural Heritage” in the Section of Anthropology and Archaeology of the Fifty-Ninth Indian Science Congress delivered at Calcutta did not talk about the original idea of his teacher as regards the necessity of ‘Economic Museums’, although Dr. Roy mentioned the article of Das in the reference section of the address published in 1972. Dr. Roy stayed far behind his teacher in his vision to develop a National Museum of Man in India. I quote from his concluding paragraph, “It is the duty of the Government of India to arrange to salvage the vast treasures of the cultural remnants lying through the length & breadth of the Sub-continent with the help of anthropologists and to document & preserve them in the proposed Museum of Man before these unique examples of culture are trampled to death” (Roy, '72: 30).

The vision of Tarak Chandra Das regarding museums in India makes a nice contrast. I quote Das, “Art and historical museums may be organised at the centre but Economic Museums should be scattered throughout the country. It should be the motto of the authorities of such museums to carry their exhibits to the very doors of the people instead of asking them to come to the museums. India is a poor country and the masses living in the villages can hardly afford two meals a day. Where will they get the money to visit the museum-towns far away from their homes and that for the luxury of seeing *tamashas* housed in mighty structures?” (Das, '43: 98).

In the rest of the article, Das elaborated his plan of building different types of Economic Museums (central, local and circuit or moving) with their specific functions, the ideal of which would be to bring knowledge about the current methods and implements of agriculture, commerce and industries in different parts of the country in concrete shape to the people who are mostly in need of it. Undoubtedly, this is one of the finest examples of Das’s articles on macro-level policy issues having immense contemporary relevance.

Tribal Religion

This is the last armchair article of Das under my discussion and it is on tribal religion in India. This article published in 1956 had a major theoretical premise. The premise is non-marxist, because unlike typical marxists who viewed religion as the opium of the exploited class, T. C. Das viewed religion and magic among the tribes of India as the major tools with which these poor people struggle for their existence under miserable conditions. In this article, Das used a plethora of ethnographic materials written by professional and amateur anthropologists on the various dimensions of tribal life in India to prove his hypothesis. The article is one of the most comprehensive anthropological research on the tribal views and beliefs on soul, land of the dead, doctrine of *Karma* and concepts of gods and spirits in India. The methods undertaken by Das in this article are comparative and he posed the problem in a macro framework (Das, '56:421-432).

CONCLUSION

In a perceptive article entitled 'From Participant Observation to the Observation of Participation: The Emergence of Narrative Ethnography' Barbara Tedlock classified four archetypes in the history of anthropology, which are: the amateur observer (Christopher Columbus, Marco Polo), the armchair anthropologist (Frazer and Tylor), the professional ethnographer (Malinowski), and the "gone native" fieldworker (Verrier Elwin), and she finally concluded that the modern ethnographer in anthropology combines elements from all the four archetypes (Tedlock, '91:69-94). Being a native of India who loved his country and the discipline of anthropology, I believe Tarak Chandra Das had combined quite successfully elements from at least the two archetypes, viz. armchair anthropologist and the professional ethnographer found in the history of anthropology. Scholars like André Béteille, who wished to look at T. C. Das only as a 'meticulous ethnographer' has not viewed him from a holistic perspective (Guha, 2016:61-62).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A shorter version of this article was presented in the UGC sponsored seminar '*Fieldwork and the Legacy of Tarak Chandra*

Das', organised by the Department of Anthropology, Vidyasagar University, in collaboration with the Anthropological Survey of India during 11-12 March 2015. I owe my debts to the organisers of the seminar and the useful comments of Rajat Subhra Mukhopadhyay, Rajat Kanti Das and Kaushik Bose, which helped me to elaborate my arguments presented in the seminar. I would like to thank the reviewers and the editor of *South Asian Anthropologist* for their useful comments on the paper. Finally, I am grateful to Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi, for providing me the financial support for carrying out the bigger research on nationalist anthropology of which this research on T. C. Das is a useful ingredient.

NOTE

1. N.K. Bose's paper entitled 'Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption' was presented as a lecture in the same Science Congress of 1941 in which T. C. Das delivered the Presidential address. Bose's lecture was later published in the journal *Science and Culture* and in course of time became famous in Indian Anthropology, while Das' lecture dealing with the role of anthropology in solving the burning and practical problems of nation building went into oblivion among the anthropologists in India (Guha, 2018:105-110).

REFERENCES CITED

- Béteille, A. 2013. Ourselves and others. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 42:1-16.
- Das Gupta, B. K., A. Basu, B. Raychaudhuri and P. Gupta 1985. *Proceedings of the Symposium on Purum (Chote) Revisited*. Anthropological Survey of India, Department of Culture, Government of India: Calcutta.
- Das, T. C. 1931-32. The cultural significance of fish in Bengal. *Man in India*, 11(3&4): 275-303.
- 1931-32, The cultural significance of fish in Bengal. *Man in India*, 12 (2&3): 96-113.
- 1941. Cultural Anthropology in the Service of the Individual and the Nation, pp. 1-29. *Presidential Address delivered in the Section of Anthropology at the Twenty-eighth Indian Science Congress, held at Benares*.
- 1941. The Bengal dowry restriction bill, 1940: An anthropological analysis of its implications. *The Modern Review*, 70 (6): 588-594.
- 1943. Practical steps towards the improvement of museums in India. *The Calcutta Review*, November, pp, 97-100.
- 1945. *The Purums: An Old Kuki Tribe of Manipur*. Calcutta University: Calcutta.
- 1949. *Bengal Famine (1943): As Revealed in a Survey of the Destitutes of Calcutta*. Calcutta University: Calcutta.
- 1956. Religious beliefs of the Indian tribes. In: Haridas Bhattacharyya (ed.), *The Cultural Heritage of India*, vol. IV. The Ramkrishna Mission Institute of Culture: Calcutta.
- Guha, A. 2016. *Tarak Chandra Das: An Unsung Hero of Indian Anthropology*. Studera Press: New Delhi.
- 2018. Scrutinising the Hindu method of tribal absorption. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 53(17): 105-110.

- Roy, S. 1972. Museum of Man – A Mirror of India: India's Cultural Heritage. *Presidential Address delivered in the Section of Anthropology of the Fifty-ninth Indian Science Congress, held at Calcutta.*
- Sinha, S. 1971. Is there an Indian tradition in social/cultural anthropology: Retrospect and prospect? *J. Indian Anthropol. Soc.*, 6:1-14.
- 1978. 'Introducing the seminar'. In: Surajit Sinha (ed.). *Field Studies on the People of India: Methods and Perspectives.* Indian Anthropological Society: Calcutta.
- Sinha, S. 1980. India: A Western apprentice. In: Stanley Diamond (ed.). *Anthropology: Ancestors and Heirs.* Mouton: The Hague.
- Tedlock, B. 1991. From participant observation to the observation of participation: The mergence of narrative ethnography. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 47(1): 69-94.
- Vidyarthi, L .P. 1978. *Rise of Anthropology in India: A Social Science Orientation.* vols. I & II. Concept Publishing Company: New Delhi.