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**ON RELEVANCE OF ANTHROPOLOGY:
INDIA**

I

I feel much beholden being invited by the Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society, Lucknow, to deliver the prestigious K. S. Mathur Memorial Lecture of 2015. I consider it a great privilege to be with you this morning and share with you, though only a few but very pleasant interactions I had with Dr. Mathur, whom I could appreciate as a very dedicated scholar, committed academician, and responsible leader of the profession. As it reflected on me, he preferred to grow along with the developments of the discipline of Anthropology.

It was not until July, 1971 that I met Dr. K. S. Mathur for the first time, when under his stewardship Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society had organized a three-day long seminar on *Social Change in Contemporary India*. Scarcely had I known at that time that my first meeting with him was also destined to be the last. Although after that very first meeting, for several years he was one among those who had held leadership of the profession, my personal engagements with field investigations in Chhattisgarh did not permit me time to sufficiently socialize with my fellow colleagues.

Nevertheless, I felt particularly honoured when on that occasion Dr. Mathur not only had invited me to attend that proposed seminar, he also insisted that I should be present at Lucknow for all the three days. I thank my stars in retrospect, as I could honour his wish. Let me honestly confess that that exposure has been immensely rewarding for me academically as well as toward cultivating a colleagueship hitherto unappreciated by me. The occasion provided me with opportunities in interacting with several stalwarts and contemporaries of the profession like Prof. S. C. Dube, Prof. G. S. Bhatt, Prof. Sachchidananda, Prof. B. K. Roy Burman, Prof. J. D. Mehra, Prof. T. N. Madan, Prof. Gopala Sarana, Prof. S. C. Varma, Prof. D. R. Pratap, Prof. J. S. Bhandari, Prof. J. S. Jadav, just to mention a few. That exposure too allowed me to a major extent to appreciate the quality of mind of Dr. K. S. Mathur, his measure of personal affection, warmth, as well as friendship.

The directory, *Anthropologists in India*, brought out by the Indian Anthropological Association in 1970 published, along with others, a fairly exhaustive Bibliography of Dr. K. S. Mathur. According to that directory, out of the 50 items published by him till then, 17 were Research Articles, three were Review Articles, and the remaining 30 were Book Reviews. These together evidently speak of his special interest in keeping himself abreast about the emerging developments in the profession. This, no doubt, is a very rare quality.

Out of the 17 Research Articles of Dr. Mathur, six are on various aspects of a Malva village. As we come to learn, he wrote his Ph. D. dissertation on *Caste and Ritual in a Malva Village*, that earned him the degree from Australian National University in 1960. Thus this apparent bias for Malva actually speaks of singularity of his devotion for achieving the goal. Nevertheless, his involvement in community studies also appears quite genuine. This becomes evident as, beside his contributions on a Malva village, he published three other essays on aspects and dimensions of village studies in India. They together reflect, what Prof. S. C. Dube calls: the fashion of the time. They, too, speak of the skill and academic power that Dr. Mathur possessed at his command.

Dr. Mathur had rather a rare optimism regarding transformations of the Indian Society. In his own words, "...change is taking place both in its structure and functioning: the amount and scope of change is stupendous, unprecedented" (1973 : VII). As analysts of the transformation scenario, it may be appropriate to have a close look at our performance record in order to appreciate the degree of veracity of his optimism.

II

In January 1978, the Anthropology and Archaeology Section of the Indian Science Congress Association organized a symposium on "Indian Anthropology : Search for Identity". What transpired there may be re-called with some profit. When the quest for knowledge had to have a universal approach, widespread was also the demand for scientific researches having direct bearing upon immediate requirements of the concerned societies. Under the circumstance, Anthropology in general as well as with particular reference to India, having been placed to a peripheral position among sciences, appeared to have subjected itself under dual pressures. (i) The demand for social relevance of scientific researches, particularly in the context of developing nations being perceptible, Anthropology in India by and large, is bound to experience and reflect signs of such pressures and Social/Cultural Anthropology in particular has to a considerable extent become culture and society specific. (ii) Anthropology, when reviewed as a part of the Social Sciences, its subjective nature becomes relatively even more conspicuous resulting in the demand for its involvement in social action.

As a science among sciences, the demand for social relevance of anthropological researches is understandable, if not sufficiently justified. Due perhaps to its major dependence on cultural materials, Anthropologists will continue to have a high proportion of subjective elements in it until they experienced some qualitative shifts in their research methodology. That, however, need not necessarily make the basic enquires, methodologies, theories, and concepts subservient to any culture or nation-state.

The same year, that is in December 1978, in his Keynote Address under the auspices of the Tenth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, S. C. Dube observed :

Impressive enlargement of its work force and creation of a sound organizational base notwithstanding, in the Third World at least, Anthropology tends to carry an uneasy conscience if not a deep-seated sense of guilt and makes a self-conscious effort to legitimize itself in the altered and emerging contexts of these societies. It is undergoing an acute crisis of identity (1979: 68)

In the same year again, the Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi organized an international colloquium on "Identity Crisis in Anthropology". Although the programme was not with particular reference to the Indian situation, nine among the 13 contributors to the proceedings being citizens of India, the discussion mostly centered around the state of Anthropology in this country. The participants, as expected, were divided in their opinion and the majority were of the view that in the process of evolutionary growth of any discipline apparent disintegration in the form of differentiation, specialization, as well as consequent complexity have to be the inevitable outcome. Those who accorded recognition to the identity crisis, nevertheless, found its genesis in lack of leadership, encapsulation in nomothetic and methodological cocoon, and such others.

What do the exercises on identity crises exactly mean? Did Anthropology really go wrong? If Anthropology has not performed as per expectation, can we ask ourselves : why ?

III

Emergence of Anthropology as an academic discipline in India is about a century old phenomenon. Even then there is an uneasy feeling almost all over the country that Anthropology could not make feel its expected impact. Whether it is due to certain inadequacies of the discipline as such or because of failure of the fellow professionals or a combination of both has not yet been closely examined. Despite presence of some very valuable references in this respect, collectively speaking, more often we tended to bypass the relevant issues than appropriately confronting them. The results have been obvious. Neither has there been any initiative toward rectification of the course, nor Anthropology could carve out a position of esteem for itself yet. We perhaps

have to accept the fact that as on today, there are not many willing takers of what Anthropologists can dish out.

For the academic disciplines as such, it is certainly not necessary that each and every one of them has to have a demonstrable social impact or scope for direct application of the generated knowledge toward management of the State. The fact, nevertheless, remains that as an academic discipline, Anthropology crystallized in Europe evidently as a tool for the management of the empires. Even when it appeared in the Indian scene, anthropological knowledge received patronization from the colonial rulers as a useful instrument toward complementing the skill of administration. Along with it, also travelled the blemishes the knowledge had earned in its previous incarnation, as the peddler of human curios. All efforts from Indian pioneers in the field could neither get rid of those images totally, nor evolve any mechanism for ignoring them.

Fighting out a public knowledge or a public image by any standard is an uphill task. When such knowledge is compounded by prejudice, inherent or otherwise, the job is several times more difficult. Unfortunately, such has been the fate of Anthropology as well as Anthropologists initially the world over. Specifically speaking, the Indian situation evidently had and still has influence of certain factors to further complicate the issue and /or further accentuate the associated maladies.

Successes of industrial revolution in Europe and nearly uncontrolled spread of hegemonic rules that followed immediately there after, perhaps had a role to play in this respect. Although the details of what had exactly happened at the post-industrial revolution phase and the extent of its impact around the world are yet to be fully known, it is rather an established fact that during the first half of the nineteenth century, when travelers and explorers brought lurid accounts of strange people from distant lands to the Western world, unaccustomed to aboriginal way of life', this not only generated a great deal of interest and curiosity but created a socio-cultural situation sufficiently suffocating for the survival of the Human Science as a body of knowledge. Unfortunately for Anthropology, the then fellow professionals, most of whom lacked the rigour of scientific training and strict discipline, yielded to the demand and went on paying much attention to Totems, Taboos, Exorcism, Spirits, Secret Societies with masked dances, etc. Beside, contributions to the monumental volumes of Sir James G. Frazer (1890), created an atmosphere of overwhelming fantasy. The skirmishes between the church authorities and the advocates of the nineteenth century evolutionists made the situation even worse.

Despite Sigmund Freud's pioneering analytical studies probing deep into the human minds, it took generations to establish that such customs and rites are neither queer, nor pathological, or exotic. Valuable as the results of

anthropological investigations are to our knowledge and for broadening our visions, some of the most significant contributions of Anthropology have to be in the application of this branch of knowledge, which was seldom visible.

Anthropology no doubt has the potential to play a leading role when viewed as a comprehensive social science, concerned with all aspects of life and culture. It thus has to be as much concerned with civilized nations as with the primitive communities. Unfortunately for Anthropology as such, there were and to a certain extent still are opinions dipped in worn-out notions, who suspect intentions of this sacred science as if, it has a vested interest in keeping the so-called indigenous populations as their exclusive preserves. Despite strong rebuttal from personalities like Dr. J. H. Hutton and Dr. Verrier Elwin, the notion still persists even in some responsible quarters in India. The issue, therefore, needs to be examined threadbare by all Anthropologists, till the load of the nonsense is wiped out from its proximity altogether. It must be emphasized at all fronts in strong unambiguous terms that concern for the humanity as such, and not any undue interest in curious rites, that make Anthropologists plead the cause of tribes as well as non-tribes.

Another somewhat imaginary but serious charge labeled against Anthropologists is their 'policy of isolation', as if to resist contacts with civilizations. Perhaps nothing could be further from truth than this as no professional Anthropologist ever had advocated such a course of action.

IV

Growth of Anthropology in India as an academic discipline under the British patronage, with its battery of borrowed concepts, methodologies, and theories, evidently suggests its uneasy transplant on the ethnic, social, and cultural realities. The very notion that until the British initiatives, India by and large was anthropologically void is altogether a misnomer.

Even without maintaining a distinction between Anthropology as a body of knowledge and Anthropology as an academic discipline, one of the pioneers of Indian Anthropology Rai Bahadur S. C. Roy, as early as in 1938, proposed to initiate a dialogue on the relevance of an Indian outlook on Anthropology. He delineated several important research areas, particularly from the domain of the higher Hindu traditions and pleaded that Anthropology need not necessarily remain restricted only to the study of the so-called lower cultures. Instead, according to him, it should include the ascertainment as well as interpretation of social attributes and evolution of all human types aiming at a future integral understanding of human cultures (1938 : 146). In fact, he was specifically inclined toward an integrated approach of Anthropology through a balanced synthesis of historical, geographical, and Indological techniques. In other words, he appeared to have been much eager in establishing a bridge between Anthropology as a body of knowledge and

Anthropology as an academic discipline, without necessarily specifying it. This was, however, not to occur. The ripples of European mind-sets and their formulation of the discipline, did not take long to reach the Indian shore. The result was as anticipated. The homegrown Anthropology as a body of knowledge by and large got relegated to the repertoire of 'no-knowledge'.

Nevertheless, the dialogue proposed by Roy (1938) even during the British rule of India could not alter the situation, neither could it instantly create any ground to bring about any qualitative transformation in the Indian participation of Anthropology. Though many among those who have contributed substantively to Indian Anthropology, at some point of time or the other attempted a synthesis in approach, but Roy's initiative by and large went unacknowledged.

About a decade and a half after S. C. Roy initiated a dialogue, N. K. Bose took upon himself the task of making critical appraisal of the contemporary research projects in Indian Anthropology. After a thorough scrutiny of the research projects undertaken by various university departments of Anthropology and the then Department of Anthropology of the Government of India (re-designated as The Anthropological Survey of India), Bose summed up his exercise with a serious disappointment that "there was no research problems that Indian Anthropologists have made specifically their own" (1952: 133).

Surajit Sinha (1971) did not directly dispute this position though, tried to identify certain preoccupations of Indian Anthropology that he designated as the Central Theme like : (i) all attention have been virtually limited to the Indian scene, (II) Indian scholars by and large tend to see the society and culture through English-speaking Western eyes, (III) The general acceptance of an intellectually dependent role has inhibited vigorous and independent exploration in the fields of general theory and research methodology, (iv) In India, proportionately higher involvement in applied problems appears evident, (v) Besides specific problems of directed change, a few have been interested in the basic ideology of change.

Whether the given central tendencies stand to mean Indianness in Anthropology can perhaps be debated.

Roy and Bose, nevertheless, demonstrated almost a common concern and despite certain reservations, endeavoured to define scope and method of a brand of Anthropology which could be identified as Indian Anthropology. Bose went a step further to pin-point the professional inadequacies in the country and pleaded for definitely active but affirmative actions toward creating a demand for application of anthropological knowledge. As he observed:

The ground is hardly covered. There are promises that much might be done.
Let us hope we shall be true to the responsibility which we think is our own

and thus do our small bit so that India of the future generations may be better than what we find it today,... (1954 : 256).

The obvious thrust of Bose's observation has been, despite expressed reservations by Surajit Sinha, on the application of anthropological knowledge, a strategy already prescribed by T. C. Das (1941), for developing a better future for the Indians as such and to create a demand for research results in Anthropology by our commitment and dedication to the cause of the nation as well as the discipline. Even at a later date, in the context of researches in Indian Anthropology, Bose more or less repeated identical feelings but evidently in more explicit terms and with a shade of optimism when he commented : "Indian Anthropology has of late been very much under the stress of the need of application" (1962 : 175).

Incidentally, even prior to such assertion of N. K. Bose, as already indicated, Prof. T. C. Das from the University of Calcutta, in the Presidential Address of the Anthropology Section of the Indian Science Congress Association in 1941 took up the issue of application of anthropological knowledge for welfare of the society at large. With particular reference to Cultural Anthropology, he attempted to draw up a blue-print, how such knowledge could be of use for the benefit of the society and the nation.

Thus when looked over time, Anthropology in India had initially a colonial overtone though, in the changing social context of independent India, it could generate some interest as well as demand for anthropological research results.

V

Prof. S. C. Dube took up the issue of relevance of Indian Anthropology all over again in 1973. He was sufficiently aware of the problems that the discipline has been suffering from. Still, there was an element of optimism in his personal views regarding the prospects of this Human Science in India. According to him, although in free India Anthropology started its journey with a major handicap, it too had several assets to get along with it. As articulated by him:

When India attained independence the climate was not wholly propitious for anthropology. Anthropologists were held suspect because of their identification with the policy of exclusion and partial exclusion of tribes which, according to nationalist opinion, was a manifestation of imperialist policy of divide and rule (1973 : 39).

Despite obvious negative load, those involved in welfare of the tribes were found conscious to the need to understand tribal life and its problems in order to be able to formulate meaningful programmes for their development and implement those programmes effectively.

During the first twenty-five years after independence, as further observed by him, there have been several significant shifts in the emphases of

Indian Anthropology. As Prof. Dube argues, "The discipline, once encased in the tribal shell and devoted almost exclusively to the monographic tribal studies, began exploring new frontiers. A major departure was the switch from tribal to rural studies". (1973 : 41).

Over the years, interest further widened from monographic studies of tribes and villages to studies focused on other defined problems. Serious questions, nevertheless, were also raised in respect of research methodology in Anthropology. Whether only empirical methods of enquiry were adequate for comprehending the socio-cultural realities of India emerged as a big issue. With Anthropologists seeking new and larger units of study, according to Dube, the fusion of Social Anthropology and Sociology became almost imminent. For moving micro to macro studies, such fusion was by and large accepted as necessary as well as desirable. N. K. Bose, too, supported the relatively closer proximity between the two disciplines at least for some time (1952 : 133). Nevertheless, Indian Anthropology was growing fairly steadily during the first quarter of post-independent India. Certain evident weaknesses notwithstanding, the discipline could generate visible optimism even among the stalwarts of Indian Anthropology.

VI

The very observation of S. C. Dube that in free India Anthropology started with one major handicap but several assets appears to be an extramodest assessment. In fact, it had a load of multiple handicaps of non-identical origin. Some among them are the carry-forwards of what it has been born with as an academic discipline. Beside being designated as peddlers of human curios and propagators of the theory of exclusion, Anthropologists almost all over the world had to suffer the ignominy of being anti-integrationists.

In view of the totality of our collective experiences, Anthropologists in India by and large earned multiple identities. Initially as peddlers of human curios, and then as tribalogists, ethnologists, anthropologists, pro-Dalits, and Anthropologists in sequence. For over centuries together, Anthropologists had to undergo a fairly long but arduous journey. The possibility for further extension of the list cannot be altogether ruled out. At each among the stated phases, Anthropology had certain uniqueness, thus distinctions. But their concern for the down-trodden by and large cuts across all phases.

It may be important to recall that when the last among the Tasmanians passed away in 1876 under tragic circumstances and rapid de-population of the so-called tribes followed, the British Scientific Associations led by the doyen of British Anthropologists, Dr. W. H. R. Rivers instituted a thorough enquiry in order to determine the causes of tribal de-populations the world over, particularly when in contact with civilization. This was, as is well known, not an isolated initiative. It is, therefore, extremely ungenerous to make aspersions

on Anthropologists when, in fact, they singularly strove for the preservation and well-being of the tribal populations. The courage and determination demonstrated by our illustrious predecessors of the profession at various incarnations of the discipline, undoubtedly suggest a careful review of the given situation for working out strategies to squarely encounter the unfriendly atmosphere thrown up by the given atmosphere. Until then, Indian Anthropology must have to be relevant and committed to the cause of the nation.

Contributions of Anthropology to the nation – building processes under the cross-currents of rapid programmes of adoption of socio-economic innovations and state – sponsored welfare measures enjoyed primacy for a couple of decades. What followed afterwards? How Anthropology got gradually pushed out of the scene?

VII

Contemporary realities of Anthropology, too, overwhelmingly suggest its ambiguous existence. As it appears now, Anthropology is suffering from a state of disorder the world over. The performance record of our Latin American colleagues who have been fairly successful in making a unique mix of Anthropology and political activism is evidently distinct in this respect. They seem to have assigned higher priority to activism than on pure academic pursuits.

Apparent similarities about the diagnosis of the problems notwithstanding, the reasons for the maladies of Anthropology are evidently different across societies and cultures. For the ex-colonial powers, who patronized its emergence and development as an academic discipline, somewhat indirectly though, for facilitating the management of the respective empires, in all probability do not consider its presence that essential any more. In fact, for several countries in Europe, Anthropology is still attributed with the character of an exotic academic discipline. Naturally, therefore, they will be least hesitant even to dispense with the discipline altogether.

For the erstwhile colonized countries, who had accepted the discipline as they were taught to, ignoring the specific demands of their respective societies and cultures, the problem appears to be relatively of much greater magnitude, since they by and large fumble in articulating their contemporary ethno-cultural realities with the frame of reference once prescribed and propagated by their colonial masters. Allurements for internal differentiation of Anthropology and tendencies for cross-disciplinary solidarity made the overall situation all the more problematic. Obviously for a pluri-cultural nation-state like India, as already indicated, the extant of maladies is evidently of much higher order. What results, therefore, is a sort of acute identity crisis that needs to be immediately addressed for the benefit of the concern people

as well as for the discipline of Anthropology as such. It is thus extremely important, if not imminent at this stage to have a close re-look at the history of growth and development of Anthropology in India, for appropriate diagnosis of the ills and to work out and appreciate proper remedial measures. Once such measures have been found useful in the highly complex Indian situation, the probability is strong for their possible emulation elsewhere.

VIII

In the Indian context, from its very inception as an academic discipline, Anthropology had rather a hesitant start that followed, as already indicated, its arduous journey all through during the past about a century. These very phenomena did not go altogether unnoticed but there has been hardly any major visible initiative toward rectification of its course for the discipline's bias-free growth and development. Several among the senior members of the profession dealt with the associated issues at length though, such issues being mostly peripheral in nature, could not meet with the desired goal. Thus the very basic reason for the apparent neglect of Anthropology has remained mostly un-interpreted. The results have been obvious, the discipline all along received only a step-motherly treatment from the academia, as if it can be dispensed with without much appreciable loss to any one. It speaks rather of a poor performance record, that too in a pluri-cultural nation-state like India, where Anthropology could have immeasurable possibilities as well as options. The discipline so far mostly failed to take advantage of this situation or make sufficient positive impact on our nation-building process.

Anthropology in India, as already indicated, has two very distinct trends having divergent tendencies. As an academic discipline, Anthropology in India is heavily inclined toward the Western tradition. As a body of knowledge, nevertheless, Indian Anthropology is extremely pristine, having scarcely any influence from elsewhere. It is rather unfortunate that even after about six decades of India's independence, there has not been sufficient cross-fertilization between these two distinct sets. If Indian Anthropology in its present identity has to live with respect, a serious scrutiny of the roles it once played and still plays has become essential, if not urgent. Indian Anthropology must have to be committed, cohesive, and relevant and for that matter, if necessary, it should redefine its central theme as well as the scope of research for itself.

IX

My dear colleagues: before I conclude, let me apologize to you all for not being able to uphold the optimism once expressed by Dr. K. S. Mathur, all through my presentation. Honestly speaking, our total collective experiences as the members of the profession, as you would recall, did not permit that. Even then, let me master some courage to assure you that the overall picture in India is neither that unpleasant nor that dismal.

Proliferation of research base during the post-independence era has given us enough possibilities to fashion out the scopes of the discipline and evolve appropriate methodological strategies to conduct our sacred responsibilities according to our own requirements. This as such speaks of a strength as well as a level of confidence hitherto unappreciated. Anthropologists in India have a strategic advantage in this respect. When the very foundation of mono-national realities are getting increasingly eroded by the waves of multi-culturalism, relegating the former to the back yard, that justifies the need for altogether a new approach. In this context, the concepts, methodologies, and theories developed out of mono-ethnic, mono-cultural, and mono-national experiences suffer from serious limitations.

Our dear colleagues from the European nations by and large consider locations of anthropological fieldworks outside the limits of Europe. Barring a small pocket in East Germany occupied by the Sorbs, German Anthropologists never paid much attention to any other populations within the country, other than those having criminal background. For the French Anthropologists, barring a very limited few, northern Africa and certain pockets of South America remained their exclusive anthropological preserves. The Dutch Anthropologists by and large concentrated their attention to the South-East Asian Islands. For the British Anthropologists, it was perhaps below their dignity to consider any population living within the British Islands for anthropological study. No Australian Anthropologist worth the name ever carried out any serious anthropological investigation among the Australian Aborigines. Even contemporary American Anthropologists left the Red Indians for study by the Bureau of Ethnological Research. In comparison, Anthropologists from India are found engaged almost everywhere.

Because of the upbringing in pluri-cultural atmosphere, they are always at ease in conducting anthropological field investigations under any circumstance and in any situation. In fact, it is a pleasure to see, how our compatriots have been performing almost all over the globe as successful members of the profession. This, in a way, is a major breakthrough which the colleagues from India can claim to be their specific contribution to the science. It makes me proud to observe that our younger colleagues do not hesitate to raise anthropologically valid questions, even when they are evidently embarrassing for the authorities in power. Some of the issues that are making rounds Anthropology these days are bold as well as refreshing.

In the context of Social Unrest when asked 'whether unrest indicates an unhealthy protest against a healthy society or a healthy protest against an unhealthy society', in respect of the so-called Maoist movement when asked : 'those who kill and those who get killed are all being fellow citizens', 'should the 'bullet' be the only answer to the problem', 'if the State survives only on its coercive power, can we call it a welfare State, 'should any State enjoy the power to legitimize its own actions when it is found ever eager to outwit its

own people', 'when the mandatory Social Impact Assessment under aegis of Environmental Impact Assessment is used as an instrument to push the original custodians out of their primary resources, can Anthropologists afford to be merely the casual observers of the development', 'should not the Anthropologists, instead, come out full blast in favour of Anthropological Impact Assessment as an ongoing survey, which is people-friendly as well as nation-friendly', are only a few to refer here. They together speak of a development in the discipline that I personally would very much like to welcome.

Demand for new strategies toward application of anthropological knowledge as per requirements of the given situation is getting louder. If that demands to forego engagements with mega-theories for the time being, and opt for middle-range formulations, that should be certainly welcome. After all, the Anthropologists in India seem very much on the threshold of a new era, when they need not have any inhibitions in embracing, along with their strategy of micro-analyses, even global issues for analysis, interpretation, and policy formulation. I am happy to observe the emergence of a new beginning along the horizon.

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