

## BOOK REVIEW

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**BIRAJA SANKAR GUHA – ARCHITECT OF INDIAN ANTHROPOLOGY**  
 by **Dr. Kamal Kumar Kundu**, Srijan Publishers, Kolkata, 2022, Pp. 148+XI.  
 ISBN: 978-81-957939-3-8, Hardbound, Price: Rs. 350/-

The evaluation of pioneers like Biraja Sankar Guha cannot be done only on the basis of the academic contributions they have made, but also by the profound impact they have left on the posterity. The works of Guha reflects an astounding magnitude of research enterprises with a visionary gaze. Guha is mostly remembered as the founder director of Anthropological Survey of India that integrates the country through its anthropological researches. However, his contribution to the holistic tradition of anthropology is remarkable. In fact, the anthropology in India mellows through different phases in the life-time of Guha as he voyaged from Formative (1784 – 1920) to Analytical (1950 -) periods through Constrictive period (1921-1949). His life and works should be analysed in this broader perspective of anthropology in India.

There are a good number of writings on Guha. After his unfortunate sudden death in railway accident in 1961, Dharnidhar Prasad Sinha and Carlton Coon wrote memoirs and obituary in *American Anthropologist* (1963). Sinha's account has been a detailed note on the life and works of Guha, while Coon writes a touchy note reminiscing his friendship with Guha. Before Sinha and Coon, however, D.K. Sen published an obituary of Guha in *The Eastern Anthropologist* (1962). Besides these scholars, B.S. Guha is remembered by scholars like P.C. Biswas (*Mankind Quarterly*, 1961; *Science and Culture*, 1961), J.D. Mehera (*Anthropologist*, 1961), A.K. Mitra (*Anthropologischer Anzeiger*, 1962), L. Cipriani (*Anthropology*, 1962), D.P. Sinha (*Journal of Social Research*, 1963). Shyamal Kumar Roy brought out an encyclopaedic volume on the selected Indian anthropologists titled *Bibliographies of Eminent Indian Anthropologists* (1974). Here Roy gave a brief bio-note on Guha along with the list of his publications. In 1996, Ranjit Kumar Bhattacharya and Jayanta Sarkar edited *Anthropology of B S Guha* which was published by Anthropological Survey of India. Professor Ajit K. Danda has also written on the life and works of Guha (2017). Professor Abhijit Guha discussed about the social anthropological writings of B S Guha, besides the latter's contribution in Nation-building. The author of the book under review published an interesting article in celebrated Bengali magazine *Desh*. Recently Nabakumar Duary has enriched us by a series of publications on B.S. Guha in Bengali (2023), English (2023) and in celluloid. In this backdrop of a plethora of publications on Guha, *Biraja Sankar Guha – Architect of Indian Anthropology* by Dr. Kamal Kumar Kundu is certainly a commendable work.

The book has five chapters including 'Introduction' and 'Conclusion'. Chapter two describes the early years of life of B S Guha. Guha was born in a reputed family in Shillong in the year 1894. The author provides us with the detail family background of

Guha, which reveals that many of the members of his family were highly established in their own domains. His father, Abhay Sankar Guha was a civilian and received the title 'Rai Bahadur'. Guha had his early education in Shillong and Guwahati. Later he came to Kolkata and studied in City College. After obtaining M.A. in Philosophy from University of Calcutta, he joined Bangabasi College. It is interesting to note that he conducted field study among the Khasis of Assam during 1917-20. While working among the Khasis, Guha came in contact with Professor R.B. Dixon who later became his supervisor at Harvard University. He was surely the first Indian to receive Ph. D. degree in Anthropology from Harvard, but not the first Indian to receive Ph.D. degree from a foreign university as mentioned in the book (p.30). Cambridge University awarded Ph.D. degree to G.S. Ghurye who did his doctoral research under the supervision of noted anthropologists W.H.R. Rivers and A.C. Haddon in 1922. Chapter three gives an account of Guha's career. It started with his joining of the Department of Anthropology in University of Calcutta from where he soon shifted to the Zoological Survey of India in 1927. The author of the book has divided the service career of Dr. Guha into three phases. The first phase was spent in the University of Calcutta and in the Zoological Survey of India. The eventful second phase was passed in Anthropological Survey of India. During this period, Dr. Guha's activities were multi-faceted. His studies spanned over Biological/Physical Anthropology, Social-Cultural Anthropology, and Prehistoric Archaeology. Author's understanding it as physical anthropology, biological anthropology and cultural study needs revision. The 'pre-historical survey' (p.44) does not come under physical anthropology as the author states. In the capacity of the advisor to the government, Guha played important role in finding out the 'reason of the human sacrifice (head-hunting) by the Nagas in Nagaland' (p.54), in advising in the matter of administration of aboriginals of India (p.56), in reporting the tribal life of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (p.77). Here, author informs us that Dr. Guha was the first Indian to make a report on the tribes in the Islands. Author has also quite commendably referred to the role Dr. Guha had in helping the government in solving the problems of the refugees who had come from East Pakistan to India. Quoting from the report, the author has drawn our attention to a very pithy comment of Dr. Guha which helps us to have an idea on the approach held by this anthropologist. Guha wrote:

"...the refugees, will have to realise that they themselves are the primary actors in the scene and without their own efforts no power can put them on their feet again... Hard life, with sweat and toil, and the use of two hands will alone re-establish them." (p.94)

It hints towards a participatory approach much before the paradigm was taken up as a strategy in development programmes. The third phase of Guha's career started after his retirement as Director of AnSI in 1954. He was entrusted with the charge of two organisations in Bihar. He made substantial contribution to the development of these organisations.

The anthropological writings of Dr. B.S. Guha were discussed in fourth chapter

of the book. The author has provided us an exhaustive list of Guha's writings and mentioned the major areas of his research interest. The discussion specifically includes Guha's work on the Indus Valley remains, his contribution in the Census of India, his book on the racial elements in Indian population, and his studies on the tribal communities.

The book presents before us a rich documentation on Biraja Sankar Guha. It coalesces a great body of information on the great anthropologists within two covers, which will be a useful reference for the students and scholars. The author deserves our admiration for the painstaking job he has done. At the same time, he should have been more careful in writing sentence like this one: 'All of them are inveterate head hunters and it is among the Rangpan and the Haimi that human sacrifice still persists' (p.59). The Tangsa of Arunachal Pradesh were known by Rangpan and Haimi in Myanmar. But the practice of head hunting was a matter of the past. Therefore, comments as quoted above may be misleading. Again, it could have been better if Guha's contribution was evaluated with references to his contemporaries. The theoretical and pragmatic implications of Guha's works could have been elaborated. There were a number of studies on B. S. Guha. A discussion on these previous works would have been done to locate the contribution made by the present work to the existing scholarship. Despite this, I must admit that the book has made a mark of its kind in the study of anthropology and anthropologist in India.

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#### **Documentary on Man In India**

The publication of *Man In India* has crossed hundred years. On this memorable occasion, Dr. Nabakumar Duary made a short documentary film on this journal out of his interest and finance. Probably there is no documentary on anthropology journals all over the world. This film pictorially documents the role of *Man In India* in the development of Anthropology in India. After a thorough research and exploration of archival data, this documentary has been made. The story of the film is illustrated with hundreds of black and white photographs, old records, old footage and interviews.

**Name of the documentary film:** Centenary Passage Man In India (1921-2020)

**Direction and Script:** Dr. Nabakumar Duary; **Edited by:** Sanjib Khan

**Duration:** 20 minutes; **Language:** English; **Year:**2024; **Format:** PAL

