

**P. C. Joshi**

## **ADVENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND BIRTH OF SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN DELHI UNIVERSITY**

The Delhi University's Department of Anthropology was established in the year 1947, the year India obtained independence from the British domination. In one sense, anthropology's advent in Delhi was much later than Bombay (now Mumbai), Madras (now Chennai) and Calcutta (now Kolkata). One possible reason for its late arrival in Delhi could be the fact that Delhi as a place became politically and administratively important quite late than the other mega-cities of India. For a long time, after the downfall of the Moghuls, Delhi remained a tehsil (sub-district) of the Punjab province. In fact, the colleges functioning under the city of Delhi were initially affiliated to Punjab University, located in Lahore city. It was only in 1922 that the University of Delhi came into its independent existence. Incidentally, the Department of Anthropology in the University of Calcutta was established one year prior to it in the year 1921. Anthropology started in Madras University two years prior to Delhi and Bombay had started publishing the first journal devoted to anthropology titled *The Journal of Anthropological Society of Bombay* way back in 1894. Even Lucknow University had hired D. N. Majumdar to teach 'primitive economics' in 1928, much before Delhi. Majumdar later on went on to establish a very vibrant department of anthropology in the same university along with establishing the Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society and India's own journal *The Eastern Anthropologist*.

Although, DU's anthropology department was going to play a very crucial role in shaping the post-independence practice of anthropology, it owes its existence to the very powerful personality of that time, Dr Biraja Sankar Guha (hence forth BSG), originally a philosopher but later earning a doctoral degree in Anthropology from Harvard University under the guidance of Prof. Roland Burrage Dixon, the first doctoral student of Franz Boas in Harvard University. BSG's thesis was a seminal work of its time in discussing the relationship between caste and race, a pet project of Sir Herbert Hope Risley. If BSG is duly credited for starting the Anthropological Survey of India (ASI), then he should also be credited for starting anthropology department in DU. The folklore has it that it was BSG who was able to impress upon Sir Maurice Gwyer, the then Vice Chancellor of DU about the immense potentials of

anthropology that Sir Maurice became interested in starting a department in DU. The fact that Dr. P. C. Biswas (herein after PCB) was called all the way from Calcutta University which was the work place of BSG further confirms this fact. Finally, to have physical anthropology as the principal focus of the department also adds to this thesis. In fact, BSG was the compulsory external examiner of DU's master's students in the subject of anthropology. In one session, BSG could not come to take the designated practical examinations in somatometry and craniometry, and so he was called to take practical examinations in serology and dermatoglyphics in the ensuing session. While the students and the chairman of the department were thinking that he would frame questions in the given syllabus, BSG chose to frame question paper in the areas of somatometry and craniometry. When reminded by the chairman that this portion had already been covered, BSG said that he would cover serology and dermatoglyphics in the viva voce but would examine the students in somatometry and craniometry as he had not yet examined them on this aspect.

Undoubtedly, Delhi's anthropology department started as a physical anthropology department. There were three dominating factors contributing to this fact. Firstly, BSG was a physical anthropologist and it was quite natural for him to promote physical anthropology and therefore, as soon as he got an opportunity of starting an academic department of anthropology, he chose to focus upon physical anthropology. Secondly, the major department of anthropology at that time was the Calcutta University department, which had cultural anthropology as its primary focus. In such a scenario, having a department with physical anthropology would have ideally complemented Calcutta department. Thirdly, BSG perhaps was interested in looking for proper rehabilitation after retirement from the Government of India. In such a situation, he was confident that he would be able to get the position of a professor in physical anthropology in Delhi University, with his very strong curriculum vitae.

In PCB, BSG was able to find a perfect person to realize his ideas. PCB was not on a teaching position when he was chosen to take care of the Delhi department. He had obtained his doctorate in physical anthropology from Berlin, Germany, and was affiliated to Calcutta University on a fellowship when BSG called him to head Delhi's department. Anthropology was not a very well developed discipline, at least in India, at that time and jobs were really very hard to find. Other than BSG, anthropologists like S.S Sarkar, K. P. Chattopadhyay, N. K. Bose, Iravati Karve, A. Aiyappan, D. N. Majumdar, Christopher von Fürer-Haimendorf and Verrier Elwin were the other towering anthropologists of his time. In comparison to all these, PCB was perhaps the most reticent. I have heard many people mimic PCB in a staccato manner of speaking under which he would never speak a full sentence but few words of the sentence. But he had the very important position of heading the department in the capital of India, a department which was always under the watchful

eyes of Indian anthropologists eager to know the direction this department the going to take. Besides, the Prime Minister of India, Pundit Jawahar Lal Nehru was also keen in the development of this department as he would not only visit it but would also send ethnographic specimens to enrich the departmental museum (Srivastava and Srivastava, 2010). In Delhi University itself, the science faculty was having stalwarts such as D. S. Kothari, T. R. Sheshadri, P. Maheshwari and M. L. Bhatia, all of whom were quite serious practitioners of 'science'. PCB, therefore, was a man on the mission who not only had to steer the department as the foremost department of anthropology in India but also as a legitimate science department in Delhi University as well.

The acquaintance of PCB with the German institutes played a very important role in shaping the physical anthropology in Delhi University. PCB was a Humboldt-Stiftung Fellow or the Akademische Austauschdienst, and therefore many Delhi students obtained this prestigious German fellowship to get advanced training in physical anthropology from anthropometry and dermatoglyphics to ergonomics. I. P. Singh, M. K. Bhasin, H. K. Kumbhani, P. Dash Sharma, P. K. Ghosh, S. L. Malik were some of the anthropology students from DU to receive such training. In the initial years, however, dermatoglyphics remained the singly most important topic for research and training in the department. It was only in later years that newer dimensions of physical anthropology started receiving adequate attention.

While Germany has made a major contribution in nurturing some major branches of physical anthropology, Great Britain contributed immensely in the development of serology, biometry and human growth and development branches of physical anthropology. The training of anthropologists like S. C. Tiwari, Raghbir Singh, S. M. S. Chahal, etc., under the watchful guidance of eminent British scientists such as Alexander S. Weiner, Lionel Penrose, James Mourilyan Tanner, P. R. M. Jones and J. B. S. Haldane laid a very firm foundation of myriad new and emerging specializations in physical anthropology. In later years, Heidelberg Human Geneticist, Prof. Friedrich Otto Vogel, imparted specialized training in the area of human genetics.

It is interesting to note that while more anthropologists from America visited DU's anthropology department, post-independence, none of the anthropology faculty got training in America. Right from Robert Redfield to Oscar Lewis, David Mandelbaum, Morris Opler to Stanley Freed, DU's anthropology department has collaborated with American scholars but British-German influence is far more visible in the practice of physical anthropology here.

### **Birth of Social Anthropology – Remembering Mrs. Hilda Raj**

It will be worthwhile to investigate why the Anthropology Department of Delhi University chose to adopt the label of social anthropology rather than

cultural anthropology. If one goes by the circumstantial explanation, then it should have been cultural anthropology instead of social anthropology. Firstly, PCB was working in Calcutta University where the sub-branch was still named cultural anthropology as Calcutta department of anthropology is mainly inspired by American anthropological tradition. In fact, even the Anthropological Survey of India, which was established by BSG, named its sub-branch as cultural anthropology. It is really strange that DU chose the label social anthropology in place of cultural anthropology. The only logical explanation for this fact would have to be found in the personality of two people, namely Sir Maurice Gwyer and Mrs. Hilda Raj. Sir Maurice Gwyer, the then Vice Chancellor of Delhi University, might have prevailed upon PCB to retain social anthropology, a distinctly British label. The other person was Mrs. Hilda Raj, the founder social anthropologist in the department, who was trained in the British tradition (she had her master's from Cambridge University).

If one were to trace the history of social anthropology in the Department of Anthropology, Delhi University, then one has to start with Mrs. Hilda Raj (herein after HR), who emerges as a very vibrant and dynamic social anthropologist of her time. HR was a Keralite Christian, married to one Mr. James S. Raj, who was a very high ranking economist of that time. The stamp of Cambridge on HR is clearly evident in her publications, especially of W. H. R. Rivers, who was not only from Cambridge but also because he had visited south India and had extensively written on the kinship system of the Toda, kinship and marriage in India and on cousin marriage in India.

HR was associated with Columbia University's study titled "Research in Contemporary India Field Study". As mentioned in the September, 1950 issue of *Human Organization* (People and Projects, 1950), HR was consulted prior to the study for the feasibility of studying the old Christian community of Kerala. It clearly confirms the fact that HR was acknowledged as an important social anthropologist of DU. It should be worthwhile to mention that Morris Carstairs (of Edinburgh University) and Morris Opler (of Cornell University) were also associated with contemporary India study.

Another important contribution of HR was her participation in a very prestigious UNESCO study (News and Notes, 1950) of the post-independence time. Initiated under the overall leadership of Dr. Zakir Hussain, UNESCO undertook Indian National Commission for UNESCO Project on Research on Social Tension. It was a very ambitious and path breaking research aimed to scientifically investigate the causes and consequences of social tensions emerging due to communal riots.

The social tension project was implemented across the length and breadth of India covering a wide variety of topics, like inter-religious tension, inter-caste tension, reasons for insecurity among the minority communities, inter-linguistic tensions, etc. Noted sociologists, economists, psychologists, anthropologists, educationists and philosophers were associated with this one

of its kind project. The DU team for the UNESCO study was led by HR in collaboration with Dr. L. C. Bhandari of the Psychology Department. The topic of this study was "A Study of Characteristic Differences between Hindu, Sikhs, Muslims in the Manner of Handling Aggressive Impulses arising from Frustration". The 1951 issue of *The International Social Science Bulletin* reported the progress of this study by stating that the team had conducted 50 interviews with the Hindu, Sikhs and Muslims.

The UNESCO study was very significant for two reasons. Firstly, HR was recognized as a competent and able researcher of the country. In the UNESCO study, she was second only to BSG who undertook the study in West Bengal. Secondly and most importantly, this study could be conveniently classified under the domain of Applied Anthropology, Anthropology of Public Policy and Anthropology of Disasters. Indeed, HR was much ahead of her time.

HR was quite active and was a regular visitor to the Indian Science Congress. Her research papers have appeared in the earlier issues of *The Eastern Anthropologist* (Raj, 1950-1951, 1952, 1953). A total of three papers have appeared in this journal which will throw some light on the academic and theoretical interests of HR.

HR's article titled "Some Observations on the Classificatory System as seen in North and South India" shows quite clear-cut influence of W.H.R. Rivers in her approach. Like Rivers, the study of the kinship system, particularly of kinship terminology was a favorite topic of HR. It is really strange that HR has not even once mentioned Rivers in this paper and she had mainly referred to the religious scriptures in the references. What really intrigues one is the fact that the entire paper is analytically quite strong exhibiting the comparative method. HR does not emphasize much on her methods but it appears that she had key interviewed subjects on kinship terminology and prohibitory degree of marriage to arrive at her findings. One may also notice a certain grain of diffusionism in HR's analysis. At one place she writes, "These observations lead to certain deductions that there are layers of social patterns persisting from ancient times, but as to which is the oldest it is difficult to be positive about" (p. 29). At another place, she concludes, "One is tempted to attempt a dating of these socio-cultural patterns to suggest that the Dravidian culture with its kinship terms illustrated by Tamil, Telugu and Kanarese, and the cross-cousin as well as maternal uncle-niece marriage prevailing among the corresponding groups is perhaps the earliest" (p. 30). HR was indeed aware of the Nehruvian 'Unity in Diversity' discourse of her time subscribing quite naturally to the 'melting pot' thesis in explaining cultural variations. This fact is distinctively reflected in her concluding statement, "The Southern peninsula is a rich hunting ground for the social historians. Here a variety of cultures had met, some blending or absorbing one another's traits, while others for religious or other reasons maintained their individuality by keeping aloof (p. 31).

Another interesting article of HR was titled "The Maternal Uncle in South India". This article can be taken as an extension of HR's views on kinship system. A social anthropologist whose earlier article had appeared next only to Louis Dumont, she continued with her focus on comparative study this time, comparing the place of mother's brother in patrilineal-patriarchal and the matrilineal-matriarchal systems. HR cites innumerable customs prevailing in different South Indian communities in order to derive her thesis. The primary theoretical orientation adopted in analyzing data in this paper was structural-functionalism with a view to study mother's brother's role in economic, social and ritualistic aspects. Incidentally, this time she mentioned W.H.R. Rivers and Radcliffe-Brown but the influence of Radcliffe-Brown is clearly visible in this paper as she had liberally used terms such as structure, alliance and function at different places in this article. In the end, she offers her prediction of what was going to happen in the forthcoming future by stating, "The changing outlook of society is causing the barriers of caste to disappear. The old conventions organized on the basis of exogamy and endogamy are losing their meaning. With more changes in the offing the institutional role of Maternal Uncle is bound to disappear altogether in not too distant a future". (Raj, 1953: 171). The first line of this quotation is of special significance in the sense that she later chose to work on the phenomenon of persistence of caste among the Hindus and the Christian Nadars of South India.

HR's third paper was on the theme of tribal development titled "Education of Adibasis". In the very beginning of this article, HR showed her concern for the integration of the tribal society into the mainstream Indian society. She was strictly against the implementation of the large-scale uniform education on the tribal societies but instead advocated for a calibrated and specially devised educational approach for the tribal societies which should be 'carefully graduated system of teaching based on the cultural life of each tribe'. HR suggested a seven staged process of implementing education where step by step the educational process was inspired by immediate and familiar oral and visible world of the tribal. In fact, she emphatically warns against the abstract contents (e.g. mental arithmetic) till these seven stages corresponding to middle school level have been achieved. The importance of cultural relativism was emphasized upon by her as prescription to the non-tribal teacher teaching in tribal areas. She stated, "Educationists should be on a goodwill mission throughout, not hoping to win the co-operation of the Adibasis by tempting them with cheap attractive material goods, or by using official authority in any manner of threat or intimidation, or trying to show off their superiority of mind and culture. Respect for the Adibasi's culture and way of life must be not only maintained on the part of the 'Teachers', but it must be sincerely felt" (p. 175).

The academic career of HR was closely tied to her husband's movements. Her husband was no less important a person. As a foremost financial wizard of the country, he got the appointment as the Director of the Asian Section of the International Monetary Fund, in Washington D.C., U.S.A.

HR joined him and as a result, her bright career was cut short. The activism of HR continued in U.S.A. as well. We learn from American newspapers (Yonkers, 1957) that HR formed an association of wives of the Indian bureaucrats called CHETNA, which was supposed to help the newly arriving wives of Indian bureaucrats in adjusting to American conditions, a distinctively anthropological pursuit. Simultaneously, HR had joined the Department of Sociology of the American University for a doctoral degree. She worked on a topic titled “Persistence of Caste in South India – An Analytical Study of the Hindu and Christian Nadars” and was awarded Ph.D. on this topic in 1958. It is ironic that the phenomenal progress of her husband can be traced who subsequently worked for the Reserve Bank of India and later joined the Unit Trust of India as its chairman, one does not hear much about HR except the mention of HR writing two novels namely ‘The House of Ramiah’ published from Lucknow Publishing House, Lucknow, in 1967 and ‘Trail of Evil’ published by Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi in 1978.

HR was indeed a very fine, energetic and highly promising analytic mind. She duly sacrificed her bright career at the altar of her husband’s career. Thus, HR was one more addition to the bright and promising women anthropologists who have to compromise their career in pursuance of a successful marriage in India.

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Paper presented in the Seminar on “Celebrating the Spirit of Anthropology” held in the Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, on November 7, 2014.