

Panchanan Mitra: Scholar Extraordinary



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Panchanan Mitra, the first professor of Anthropology in India, was born to a well-known family at Soora, an eastern suburb of Calcutta. Prof. Mitra was a member of a family already highly distinguished in the study of Indian history and culture. The Mitra family was one of the oldest families of Bengal and received various honours from the Bengal Nawab. Raja Pitambar Mitra migrated to Oudh after the disaster at Palashi, and the family was settled there for many generations. When the family was under Ajodhyaram they received many honours from the Nawab Vizir of Oudh as well as the emperor at Delhi. Many members of the Mitra family were well known in literary circles. Pitambar and his grandson, Janmejay Mitra wrote Brajabuli poems. Janmejay was an Urdu poet of distinguished standing as well. Prof. Mitra's grandfather's elder brother, Raja Rajendra Lal Mitra, an eminent scholar, was the first Indian president of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (present day Asiatic Society) and one of the pioneers of the Indian Renaissance.

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After a distinguished career at the University of Calcutta and four years as a lecturer in English, Mitra in 1919, was awarded the Premchand Raichand Scholarship by Calcutta University for a thesis published afterwards (1923) titled '*Prehistoric India*'. In the same year he was appointed as a faculty at the Department of Anthropology, Calcutta University. Later he became the Head of Department on the retirement of Diwan Bahadur Dr. Anantha Krishna Iyer in 1932. At that time, anthropology as an academic subject was taught only at Calcutta University which had introduced it for the first time in India in 1919.

Recommended by Dr. Craighill Handy, he was appointed to a fellowship of the Bernice P. Bishop Museum, Honolulu, USA and travelled extensively in Polynesia, collecting evidence bearing upon the problem of the influence of Indian cultural traits on Polynesia. He was awarded a Bishop Museum Fellowship in 1924 for studying '*Polynesian affinities with India*'. His results from these studies were published and attracted worldwide

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attention. A period spent at Yale University working under the supervision of the famous anthropologist Dr. Clark Wissler on distributional studies resulted in 'A History of American Anthropology' (Calcutta, 1931), for which he was awarded a Ph.D. in 1930. He was the first Indian to obtain a Ph.D. degree (in any subject) from Yale University. In 1931 he also visited Spain and southern France as a member of the American School of Archaeology in France. He presided over the Anthropological and Archaeological Section of the Indian Science Congress in 1933 and the anthropogenetics sessions of the Indian Population Congress, Lucknow in 1936.

Mitra was awarded several medals and fellowships during his lifetime and was a member of several professional bodies. He was awarded the Fellowship of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland. He was appointed as the Assistant Curator of the Archaeology Section of the Indian Museum. He was the Honorary Magistrate of Kolkata from 1922 to 1924 and later served as a Councilor in the Municipal Corporation of the city till 1927. He was also an associate member at the American Museum of Natural History. The Asiatic Society awards an annual 'Panchanan Mitra Memorial Lectureship' for outstanding contributions to the field of anthropology in his honour. Several of his students became eminent personalities, most notably, Nirmal Kumar Bose, who was the personal/private secretary of Mahatma Gandhi during the Noakhali pre-partition riots. Another prominent student was Prof. P.C. Biswas, who founded and became the Head of Department of Anthropology, Delhi University. Mitra published prolifically and is universally known for his works 'Prehistoric

India' (1923), 'History of American Anthropology' (1930) and 'Indo-Polynesian Memories' (1933).

The recent (2005) publication of his book titled 'Manual of Prehistoric India' underlines the importance and relevance of Mitra's work even today. Although his contribution far exceeded the realms of anthropology, probably his greatest legacy is the introduction and development of anthropology as an academic discipline in India. It must be mentioned here, that at present, anthropology and its related sub-disciplines are taught in more than 60 Indian universities. This is the centenary year since anthropology was established as an academic discipline in India. It is unlikely that anthropology would have developed as a well established academic subject without Mitra's pioneering efforts and far-sightedness. The flourishing of anthropology in India is a testimony to the legacy of Mitra. His contribution must be remembered with great reverence. He is truly the 'Scholar Extraordinary'.

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Significant Publications of Prof. Panchanan Mitra:

- Mitra, P. 1923. *Prehistoric India: Its place in the World's Cultures*. Calcutta University: Calcutta.
- 1930. *A History of American Anthropology*. University of Calcutta: Calcutta.
- 1933. *Indo-Polynesian Memoirs*. B. P. Bishop Museum: HI, USA.
- 2005. *A Manual of Prehistoric India*. Cosmo Publications: New Delhi.



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