

COMMENTS ON THE RECENT ISSUE OF EA

Vol. 69 Number 1
January-March 2016

Yogesh Atal

I must hasten to congratulate the editors of *The Eastern Anthropologist* for the recent issue (Vol.69, No. 1; January-March 2016) focusing on the development of the discipline in India.

After due intervals, such exercises should be undertaken to update the disciplinary history. I recall the book done by Professor L.P. Vidyarthi on Indian Anthropology in 1970s. The ICSSR Surveys of research also provide good material on the manner in which anthropology developed in India. When the first ICSSR Survey was carried out, I was handling the Project as Director, ICSSR. As a back room boy I did the editing of the three volumes devoted to sociology and anthropology. In later ICSSR surveys, the coverage became rather limited. Interestingly enough much of this literature relates to social anthropology as major researches in India were then carried out on tribes, castes and villages.

Because of increasing interactions between sociology and social anthropology, the separation became somewhat artificial, and the latter ICSSR surveys did not maintain the distinction between them. To remind, Professor I. P. Singh got the ICSSR Fellowship towards the end of his career despite the fact that his major contributions were in the area of physical anthropology. His small paper on the Sikh village, done when he was assisting Oscar Lewis, was then a contribution to the emerging field of village studies. His senior fellowship towards the end of his career was given to restudy that village.

There is another book titled *Anthropology in India: Current Epistemology and Future Challenges* edited by Ajit K. Danda and Dipali G. Danda was published in 2010. That is a good update but is selective, and some of the essays in it are in the nature of paragraphic summaries—their fuller versions are perhaps still awaited.

Anthropology in Indian universities came very late. India was important as a site for foreign researchers, with more than 212 major tribes. India offered initially good empirical material but not many anthropologists. It were the scholars inducted from other disciplines who Indianized training and research in India.

When we were students, the profession was small – few departments and few teachers-researchers. Its teaching started at Calcutta (then spelt this way) University. Later, departments were set up at Lucknow University, Delhi University, and at Ranchi University. The department at Saugar University was set up in 1955 as the Department of Anthropogeography; in 1957 it was split into two separate departments of geography and of anthropology. Calcutta also had its first teachers who were trained in geology and geography, and in some other sciences. Anthropology entered Lucknow via the department of Economics where it was taught as part of sociology. The first anthropologist hired at Lucknow – Dr D.N. Majumdar – was designated as Lecturer in Primitive Economics. Ranchi University began teaching anthropology when Professor Sachchidanand, a professor of history, returned from England after some training in anthropology. From Ranchi, a Journal named *Man in India* was started in 1921 by a lawyer – S.C. Roy — who was interested in the studies of tribals in Bihar.

The Department of Anthropology at Delhi University started in Delhi around 1947 with a geneticist trained in Berlin – Dr P.C. Biswas. He was brought in to Delhi from Calcutta to head the department as reader. Twelve years later, in 1959, he was promoted as Professor. Though he carried out some social anthropological research, he was a key promoter of physical anthropology, particularly biological aspects of the discipline.

Among these pioneers, Professor S.C. Dube had the distinction of becoming Professor at the age of 35. He was B.A. (Hons) in Political Science, and a Ph. D. in Social Anthropology. Incidentally, for the record, I must mention that I was appointed Research Director in the grade of senior professor when I had just completed 33 years. The same year I was also offered Professorship at the Jodhpur University, in the Department of Sociology.

In this Issue of the EA Journal I find the essays on Medical Anthropology and on Research Methodology useful.

The essay on Medical Anthropology tells about the introduction of the sub-branch in anthropology courses.

The essay on methodology, though competently written is text bookish, nothing original. It does not dwell upon methodological issues relative to anthropological research – both in physical and in social anthropology. One would expect in this essay a discussion on the separation advocated by the practitioners of sociology and anthropology in terms of microcosmic and macrocosmic research, or Participant Observation and Survey Research. In the 1960s this debate was very prominent. While physical anthropologists abstained from this intellectual debate and chose the path of moving away and towards biological sciences, social anthropologists and sociologists worked hard to maintain their disciplinary boundaries. In the company of physical anthropologists, social anthropologists were treated as “misfits” who have

absconded to another discipline, and in sociological circles they were regarded as “intruders”.

People like Dube, Bêteille, Madan, Chauhan, and I ignored such criticism and continued to work; their names figure prominently in both the disciplines as key contributors. The debate is now over, although it is still part of internal politics of the twin disciplines.

It is in this context that I find Abhik Ghosh’s essay most disappointing. While the title of his essay suggests that the author is going to focus on the role of the State in the development of anthropology in the North-Western part of India, he did nothing of that sort. Instead he became eulogical in introducing his seniors and juniors all of whom have incidentally originated from the same school.

On the anthropological scene of India even today there is very little imprint of those scholars who are working in the region chosen by the author.

It cannot be a simple slip of the pen that while talking about Panjab University, Ghosh did not even mention my name as one of the three teachers who started the Department. Chronologically, after Chopra I was the one to join the department; a day later J.C. Sharma joined. It is now history that when the interviews were conducted for the post of lecturer in social anthropology, I was unable to present myself because of the countrywide strike of railways and telegraph and postal services. But I was telegraphically called again to appear before the selection committee, with Professor Biswas as the expert. Since I was the only candidate in social anthropology, and was specially invited to appear before the Committee, I was chosen, for the post. Professor Jagdish Sharma was selected for the post of lecturer in Physical Anthropology. Both of us shared the burden of teaching all the subjects, as Chopra considered himself too great to take the classes. He was proud of his German degree and a tiny tool he claimed to have invented. While Professor Sharma remained in the Department until his retirement, I remained peripatetic, a nomad, and crossing disciplinary boundaries. The department remained heavily populated by physical anthropologists, mostly from DU. Professor Seth came there for his Ph.D. when I was there. Mehta – also a product of Delhi – chose the Department of Sociology for his doctoral work. Incidentally, many sociology students came to attend my lectures on kinship, caste, and village studies; this included Professor Harold Kaufman of the Mississippi University who was a rural sociologist.

We took students to Kulu-Manali for field work. All the students – specializing in physical or in social anthropology – were made to do field work, on different aspects of village life. I also joined them and prepared my field notes on the basis of which I did a paper on the Kulu Hill village that was published in the *Journal of Social Sciences*, Agra University.

I did not stay long in Chandigarh in an adverse environment. Luckily, I was offered assistant professorship with eight increments to teach sociology at the Institute of Social Sciences, Agra University. After me, Gopala Sarana came to teach at Chandigarh, but he too opted out at the first opportunity. Even when I joined the Agra Institute I continued guiding my Chandigarh students; some students even came to Agra to stay with me and complete the courses or to finalize their theses.

In his essay, published in the EA, Ghosh has not done history, he has written citations. To be sure, this is not the meaning of being microscopic. From his description of the Anthropology in the so-called North-West I only learn names of youngsters, which is good, but I need to know more about their contributions. The profession should not become a society for mutual appreciation.

The trend of quoting, and making bibliographical reference to foreigners, is an index of inferiority complex. As an experimental guinea pig I just checked, out of curiosity, the index of a book *Anthropology in India* edited by Ajit K. Danda and Dipali G Danda, published in 2010. I was not at all surprised to see my name missing in the index in spite of the fact that after my return to India after a 23 year long stint at the United Nations I have profusely written. Even during my UN tenure I did three volumes on Swidden Cultivation, one on Anthropology of Food, and edited several volumes on the status of women, Nation Building, Migration to Middle East, and Migration of Talent, among others. My papers on Indigenization of Social sciences, and on Sandwich Cultures, have attracted wide readership outside of India, but not here. I was also a full member of the High Powered Committee appointed by the Government of Rajasthan to examine the claim of the Gujars for the tribal status. That Report contributes to the debate on the definition of the tribe. My recent publication from Routledge raises the question of the definition of tribe. But who cares? In that entire book only Professor Kamal K. Misra lists me in his bibliography. Had the full paper on the Gujar crisis in Rajasthan been published in the book, surely my name would have figured.

Countrywide, I see the trend of the neglect of social anthropology, and careful avoidance to refer to the work of fellow Indians. This is rather worrying.

At the international level, there is a strong recommendation for bringing back Culture in the Centre. But here we are becoming poor cousins of biologists. Is it not a cause for worry? Social Anthropology has new challenges; we must prepare to face them in the near future, and keep away from useless controversies regarding disciplinary boundaries.

Postscript: Upon reading the above comments, some distracters may conclude that I am hankering after publicity. At age 80 I need not beg recognition. The profession has given me enough to feel grateful.