

PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON RESEARCH METHODS IN SOCIAL SCIENCES: Emerging Trends and Current Challenges

The Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society, Lucknow organized the biennial conference on “Research Methods in Social Sciences: Emerging Trends and Current Challenges” on 23-24 March, 2013. It was hosted by the Department of Sociology, University of Lucknow, Lucknow. In his inaugural address, Professor T.N. Madan said that empiricism and rationality are essential ingredients of a philosophical inquiry. Dividing his presentation in two parts, he first provided a capsule account of the methods in social sciences since their inception, pointing out the weaknesses of each one of them, and exploring the possibility of combining them. The second part of his presentation dealt with the priority areas in the study of Indian society, for example, environmental degradation, rise of fundamentalism, the impact of globalization, etc.; these areas, he thought, required an urgent study.

Prof. I. P. Modi, the President of Indian Sociological Society he focused in his key note address on the study of leisure— the field he termed ‘leisurology’. He shows that leisure is not only a province of study but also a method that can be adopted in field work. His examples came from both the Western and Eastern societies.

In his presidential address, Sri G. Pattanaik, Vice Chancellor, University of Lucknow, Lucknow, drew attention to the impact of technology on society. He substantiated his point with the example of how railways contributed to a breakdown of a caste taboos. The changes that are surfacing in society because of globalization deserve our immediate attention, for which appropriate methods are needed. Prof. Rajesh Misra, Head, Department of Sociology, Lucknow University, Lucknow welcomed the delegates and introduced the guests on the Dias and Dr. Sukant K. Chaudhury familiarized the audience with the activities of the society and delineated the aims of the conference.

Prof. Vinay Kumar Srivastava in his valedictory address compared the research methodology books and articles in 1950s with those published in recent years. The issues of ethics and politics of research were not so important then as they are now. Contemporary researches adopt a pragmatic point of view, wherein, quantitative and qualitative aspects of research are combined, rather than arguing in favour of the epistemological superiority of one over the other.

There were three symposia on conceptual and methodological issues and ten technical parallel sessions in which 76 papers were presented by different scholars from the different parts of the country. The first symposium was on The Logical and Philosophical Issues of Social Science Research. Presentation was made by Prof. Ravindra Ray of Delhi University, Prof. J.K. Pundir of Meerut University, Prof. P.S. Vivek of Mumbai University and Prof. Rajesh Mishra of Lucknow University. It was chaired by Prof. R.K.Jain of JNU and Prof. R. Siva Prasad of Hyderabad Central University. The second symposium was interdisciplinary in nature – “Social Research: Competing Social Science Disciplines” and the presentations were made by Prof. Nishi Pandey, Department of English, Lucknow University, Prof. Arvind Mohan and Dr. Manoj Agrawal of Deptt. of Economics, LU, Prof. Manoj Dixit of Deptt. of Public Administration of LU and Prof. Rakesh Chandra, Deptt. of Philosophy, LU. It was chaired by Prof. A. K. Sengupta, Deptt. of Economics, LU. The third symposium was on emerging trend and challenges in social science research and was chaired by Prof. I. P. Modi, presentation were made by Prof. A. R. N.Srivastava of Allahabad University and Dr. Nita Mathur of IGNOU.

In the conference the following issues emerged:

1. Today is the age of knowledge and knowledge cannot be compartmentalized; hence a holistic approach to research is required.
2. Empirical researches are gradually fading away and students are becoming of shy of conducting field work, hence a relook at the whole approach should be made.
3. There is much needed research among the vulnerable section of the society which should be given a priority.
4. Qualitative research should be promoted and writing up qualitative research is a major concern today.
5. Policy studies should be given a priority in research so that social scientists can influence the administrators and politicians.
6. Five elements of research are very important – Descriptive, Critical, Phenomenological, Analytical and Rational.
7. In e very social research the elements of simplicity, i.e., duplicity in research should be strictly avoided and there should be a proper classification of meanings and concepts.
8. Ethics in social science research is of utmost importance – ethics in terms of ideology, gender, class should be followed.
9. Social change should be studied in light of hyper-globalization process.
10. Research scholars must concentrate on understanding ontology, epistemology, exiology, rhetoric and methodology.

Sukant K. Chaudhury
Convenor, Conference

IN MEMORIAM

Vardesh Chandra Channa (5 May 1946 – 26 July 2013)



Born in 1946, Vardesh Chandra Channa, a retired associate professor of social anthropology at the Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, hailed from an affluent and distinguished family of Delhi. For schooling, he went to Mayo College, Ajmer; and then read science subjects (physics, chemistry, and mathematics) for his graduation at St. Stephen's College of the University of Delhi. In 1967, he completed his post-graduation in anthropology (specializing in social anthropology) from the Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi; and thenceforth, joined a Ph.D. under the supervision of Professor P.C. Biswas, the founder of the Delhi department of anthropology, to work on a community of

Agrawāls (a caste category falling under the Vaishya *varṇa*) in Old Delhi. The time when research scholars generally chose to carry out their field studies in tribal communities or multi-caste villages, Channa pioneered an urban study, thus becoming one of the first urban anthropologists in India. Not only that, he later supervised an M.Phil. dissertation on industrial anthropology, in which he advised his student to pay especial attention to the concepts of work, leisure, and labour, and their qualitative and quantitative measurements. Channa was well ahead of his time.

For his doctorate, he decided to spend a lengthy time with the Agrawāl families in Old Delhi, particularly in the neighbourhood known as Bāzār Sitā Rām. His thesis – of which one of the examiners was Professor L. P. Vidyarthi, for I have seen one of its copies on the first page of which was written 'Examined, L. P. Vidyarthi' – received well deserved accolades. Channa later decided to convert this work on caste identity and continuity into a book, to be later published by B. R. Publishing House. Being an innate perfectionist, he resolved to go to Bāzār Sitā Rām for some more fieldwork – to 'learn from the field', to 'gain more insights' – and also to collect life history accounts of at least two elderly women, the detailed analyses of which would constitute one of the appendices of the book. And, at this point, I came to know Channa well; before that I knew him as a senior scholar, with an exemplary command over English, who drove big, expensive cars, and regaled all with his wit and peals of laughter.

Once, on the eve of Holī, what is known as the 'evening of Holikā *dahan*' (the 'burning of Holikā'), when Hindu burn a volcano-like mountain of the pieces of wood, resembling the funeral pyre, fastened circularly with ropes in which hang cow-dung cakes, I saw Channa standing with his back resting against the wall of a street where Holikā was awaiting its ritual cremation. I went up to him and sought his kind permission to share his company, which he gladly granted. Standing next to him, I tried to learn what he was

observing – he was noting down all that was happening: women coming in groups and offering ritual ingredients to Holikâ, men consigning to it old rubber tyres, items of food, and pieces of broken furniture. Why were they doing this? What was the native understanding of their acts? How people related them – in terms of their cosmology – to the entire ritual of Holikâ *dahan*? Later, when Holikâ burnt, people warmed the shoots of green gram (locally called *bât*) and carried these home as ‘transvalued food’ (*prasâd*). The little I learned from him at that time whilst he observed the hustle-bustle of Bâzâr Sîtâ Râm, kindled my interest in social anthropology – how some observations that may appear trivial are in fact pregnant with meaning, and thus for social anthropologists, every nuance of behaviour, every grunt and groan, so to say, is meaningful. I almost became Channa’s apprentice; and later introduced him to the family where he found an elderly woman whose life history he meticulously collected. Channa was magical – he could easily build up relations with people; his infectious smile and optimistic demeanour was enough to make his respondents feel at ease and open up.

Channa’s book titled *Caste: Identity and Continuity* (1979) provided a well-interpreted thick description of the Old Delhi merchant caste and the place of caste – as a system of social affiliation – in their lives. It was one of the first ethnographic studies of an urban caste, followed by the one that his wife, Subhadra Mitra Channa, did on the caste community of washerpersons (*dhobi*) in 1984. Channa was always interested in the study of religion, so the second book he published in 1984 was on Hinduism. This book, published by National Publishing House, though a scholarly study, was written for all shades of readers – it could be read as much by a foreign traveller to India as by a theologian. Carrying English translations of some of the Hindu texts and invocations, Channa, in this book, brought together the textual as well as the contextual understanding of Hinduism. In 1986, a Kentucky professor of anthropology, John Van Willigen, visited the Delhi department of anthropology as a Fulbright Fellow. He collaborated with Channa on a study of the practice of dowry in India and the laws that prohibited it. Looking at it from the perspectives of legal and applied anthropologies, Van Willigen and Channa published one of the oft-quoted papers in anthropology (‘Law, Custom and Crimes against Women: The Problem of Dowry Deaths in India’, *Human Organization*, 50 (4): 369-77 [1991]).

Let me say a little more about this paper, for it made a seminal contribution to first, the understanding, and then resolving, an ‘evil social practice’ in India. Carefully studying the socio-cultural dimensions of dowry practices – its giving, receiving, and demanding – in different regions of India, Van Willigen and Channa showed that increase in dowry deaths was to a large extent the result of rapid inflation in India and the compelling demands of a consumer-focused economy, escalating over time. Consumerism expanded insanely and unabatedly; it was not shunned and stood contrapuntal to the practices in traditional India, conveyed pithily in the statement: ‘Simple Living, High Thinking’. Coupled with a patrilineal reckoning of descent, where wife-takers were regarded as superior to wife-givers, the wife-takers started demanding disproportionately high dowry money to buy consumer goods. Van Willigen and Channa concluded that negative feelings against female children, coupled in many areas with sex-determination practices and selective abortions, were all because daughters and sisters were thought to be acute financial burdens. Since this article was a contribution to applied anthropology, it recommended many social practices and changes in laws, especially gender-neutral inheritance laws, that might be gradually adopted to combat dowry practices and bride-burning, and lead to the emergence of a more egalitarian social life.

It was unfortunate that Channa got a permanent teaching position in the department of anthropology quite late, at the age of thirty-eight, in 1984, whereas his juniors – who had studied physical anthropology – were recruited as lecturers early in their lives. Principally, it was because the department was trying to shape itself as a ‘department of physical anthropology’; the faculty of social anthropology was woefully understaffed, notwithstanding the fact that there existed a full-fledged specialization in social anthropology, called ‘Group – B’. For an incredibly long time, only three teachers (J. D. Mehra, J. S. Bhandari, and I. S. Marwah) managed the entire teaching in social anthropology. Channa was the fourth one. Although when he was not a permanent faculty, he used to teach portions of a combined course of M.Sc. (Second Year) titled ‘Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in India’. ‘Better late than never’, believing in this adage, Channa started his journey as a teacher, pioneering the teaching of an optional M.Sc. (Second Year) course in psychological anthropology and establishing its ‘laboratory’. In formative years, he collaborated with the Delhi department of psychology, but later he taught the entire course on his own. This course remained unoffered for a long time when Channa fell ill, and a couple of years ago, its teaching resumed with P. C. Joshi, and then R. P. Mitra. Channa supervised a number of M. Phil. and doctoral dissertations, ranging from a study of tribal institutions to that of aesthetics, and many of his students are today’s well known scholars. Several national and international anthropologists rated him very high, particularly Gopala Sarana, who in December 1984, invited six anthropologists to speak in a seminar to commemorate the birth centenary of Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), and Channa was one of them and his lecture was on the systemic approach in anthropology.

Channa was one of the founders of the journal that his department colleagues (four excluding him) started in 1978. Bearing the name *Spectra of Anthropological Progress* (SAP), the journal continued with its publication for a decade before being closed down for a number of reasons. The SAP editorial board – of which Channa was a member – used to hold its regular meetings and Channa would impress all with the range and sumptuousness of his ideas and practical experience. Not many know that he had solid, insider’s understanding of the political scenario of the country and his colleagues and friends listened to his incisive analysis with rapt attention.

It is unfortunate for the fraternity of anthropologists that Channa’s spectacular academic career was cut short because of his illness. He was a mine of ideas, an extremely well-read man, a pioneer and crusader; and he would always be remembered for his generosity, originality, and his ability to state the truth, howsoever vitriolic it might be.

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