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## **MY JOURNEY WITH ANTHROPOLOGY**

The Department of Anthropology of Delhi University was fortunate to have a faculty member who was trained in Cambridge. Ms. Hilda Raj taught archaeology as an integral part of Anthropology. However, from the beginning, in 1947, to almost upto 1962, practical classes in Archaeology involved tracing of illustrations from such books as those by Oakley, Solace, Maccurdy, etc.,. Consequently as a student I had never seen any real prehistoric tool. This created a great degree of problem for us, because external examiners coming for practical examinations used to bring tools from their excavations or private collections, and ask us to recognize these types.

Around 1962, a gentleman called Shri Rameshwar Singh, who was pursuing his Ph.D. at Deccan College, Pune, joined the department as a faculty. We had a great hope that the branch of prehistory would now get a solid footing. Within about a year and half, Rameshwar Singh resigned to join a research fellowship in some country in Europe. After coming back to India, he went back to Sagar, the town to which he belonged. Later on both he and his father were killed by the dacoits.

I had completed my Ph.D. work on physical anthropology of the Anglo-Indians in 1964 and joined Lucknow University as an ad hoc lecturer. I joined obviously as a physical anthropologist and Lucknow department was traditionally weak in this branch. I used to get a salary of Rs. 399 and 90 paise, ten paise used to be cut for the revenue stamp, which used to cost 10 paise those days. This salary was hardly enough to meet my hostel expenses. On top of it, I was so homesick that almost every Friday night I used to board the train to Delhi and Sunday night get into the train to Lucknow, in order to take my classes on Monday morning. So when a post was advertised in Delhi University, I promptly applied for it. The essential qualification for the post was physical anthropology with an ability to teach archaeology. I thought, I should try and learn archaeology, if appointed.

I must go back a couple of years to elucidate the metamorphosis that was happening within me. In 1964, I applied for a CSIR post-doctorate fellowship on the topic: Inheritance and functioning of amino isobutyric acid in human urine excretion. This called for a quantitative estimation of excretion

of this amino acid in one's 24 hours period of urine. Electrophoretically activated spot is created in the blotting paper. This spot needed to be put through a photo densitometer to evaluate the actual amount of amino acid in microgram. We had no photo densitometer in our laboratory. So armed with a letter from my Head of Department, Prof. P.C. Biswas, I went to meet Dr. Talwar of AIIMS. This gentleman had just come back from USA and was young and full of energy. He was coming out of O.T. surrounded by a bunch of young doctors. I gave my letter of introduction and asked if I could use their photo densitometer. Dr. Talwar gave me a regular tongue lashing accompanied by sniggering from the group of sycophants around him. He said, this was stupid research. One should do research to alleviate human suffering and not just trace some crazy pair of alleles of no consequence.

I was humiliated to the roots. I came back to the department and on the same day sent my resignation letter to CSIR (fortunately I had not received the first installment of my scholarship till then). Next day, I applied for a UGC post-doctorate fellowship. This time my topic was: Social Contours of the Anglo-Indians of India,

Not only did I change to social anthropology, I went to the extent of distributing all my prized collection of physical anthropology books to my younger colleague, Prof. P.K. Seth. On hearing my topic for post-doctorate research, my social anthropology professor called me to his room, locked it from inside and said, "Do not flirt with a subject you're not trained in." As luck would have it, an extremely benign professor of social anthropology who had just returned from England after completing his Ph.D. under Commonwealth Fellowship was my neighbour and with his guidance and help I instructed myself and entered the portals of structuralism, functionalism and finally structure-functionalism. I could complete one field work for Bombay Anglo-Indians and finalized a paper for the journal *Race* which is published by the Institute of Race Relations, London. This paper has now been reprinted in a book on minorities edited by Prof. Kathelene Rose, USA.

Thus, entering for the selection process for a post in archaeology without any kind of expertise in archaeology didn't make me nervous. I must also record here that I had obtained as low as 48 marks out of 100 in my M.Sc. (Previous) archaeology paper. The main attraction for me was that Delhi University provided me train fare to come back home, so why not. Iravati Karve and D.K. Sen were the two experts and neither of them asked me any question on archaeology— perhaps because they themselves were not very conversant with archaeology. I got selected and joined in December. I was asked to take only racial history classes for the remaining four months. In May, my Head sent me to Prof. H.D. Sankalia at Pune to learn archaeology. This was a turning point in my life.

H.D. Sankalia was such a dedicated teacher that I would not hesitate to call him a saint. Allow me to give an example to establish my view. He

would knock at the door of the room where I was staying in Deccan College campus. (My class friend Prof. K.C. Malhotra had a small quarter allotted to him and I was staying with him.) It would be still dark around 5 am. He would wear a monkey cap and would advise me also to carry some head-gear to protect myself from early morning chill. We would walk together for nearly 2 kms. before reaching the bridge on the river Mula-Mutha in Yerwada. Please believe me when I say that this lean and extremely thin man who was past sixty would walk much faster than me, and I was just above 26 years. Together we would go down to the river bank, he in the front and I following him behind. It is a common knowledge that river banks are used for defecation. Early morning, the entire area was spread with human excreta stinking to high heaven. Prof. Sankalia would be oblivious of the stink. His milk white clean *dhoti* touched the ground when he would kneel down at a place where he must have brought many other students before me. With extreme excitement and a glow in his eyes he would clear the soil with his own hand and say, "You see, this is the actual gravel of second Pluvial that I was talking about." I could only see the top of the bent whitehead, then the bright pair of eyes looking up at me with such pride as if he was showing me the actual gate of heaven. I could not even use a handkerchief to cover my nose when I saw excitement in his eyes. I was a nobody and what he was doing for me was entirely unfathomable for me. It was not only this, he asked his artist Mr. Dalvi to make a model of the river section in a portable box with glass cover for me to take back to Delhi. He would give a mischievous smile and say, "You can't take your students to the river, so let the river come to them in the classroom."

I am told that the series of Indiana Jones films was responsible in doubling the number of students registering for archaeology course in American Universities. The attraction of mystery and adventure draws anybody but I was drawn by the dedication of a saint who, like a guru ingrained in me that teaching is a major path of nation building because students of today are going to become the future leaders in research. A person who had never seen a prehistoric tool except in the illustrations of books was now drowned with tools from every surveyed site. Within two months, I became completely satisfied that I could deal with Indian prehistory with confidence. I came back to Delhi with plaster casts of many such classical ceramic types as Harappan, Malwa, Ahar and Gilund varieties. As a footnote I might also add that I also had the rare and most fortunate luck to gain a wife from one of the most reputed families from Pune during these visits.

Coming back to Delhi, I thought the students must see real tools within their original context. This required changing the syllabus. The Head was very kind and allowed me to include field work as a part of practical. The dissertation presented by every student was to be marked. Field work in prehistory is not always near any human habitation. Thus, taking students to

such places where there was no place to stay or no possibility of getting food and water was always a big challenge. Within about 20 years, we had collected such an enormous amount of tools from almost all the periods of Palaeolithic and Mesolithic that we could easily donate tools to many colleges and universities.

One fine morning, on entering the department I saw all my beautiful collection had been thrown outside in a garbage dump by the new Head of Department. I did not ask the head the reason for his action, but from the laboratory attendant I came to know that the new Head felt that these tools were responsible for spreading white ant in the museum. I was recollecting how for nearly 18 years, from 1947 to 1965 we were being taught from book illustrations because we had no prehistoric tools in the department. Then, these tools had suddenly become a mess and nuisance. Please do not think I am trying to pass on a value judgment. What I am trying to say is that in the few decades that had passed from the time we were students and the eighties and the nineties anthropology has chosen such a path of specialization that one branch finds the methods of another branch completely irrelevant. Once, I tried to convince a social anthropology colleague of mine that prehistoric archaeology deals with culture and we often use the expression litho-culture. He laughed out to show his disagreement and advised me to read Morris Opler.

In 1971, I was selected for a German government fellowship. Prof. I.P. Singh was the Head and he said that I should at least give him the notes of my lectures so that if I am relieved the person appointed in leave vacancy could teach with the help of these notes. I am told Prof. A.K. Kalla was appointed in my leave vacancy but I do not know whether those notes were ever used. I wrote down the entire course of European, Indian and African Prehistory, within a period of 20 days, and left this with Prof. I.P. Singh. Prof. Singh helped me to get a publisher for this book which was published in my absence in 1972. Thus, at the age of 32 years, I became the author of a textbook. This book became extremely popular and I am told its Xerox copies are sold in black in degree colleges of Bihar, Odisha and West Bengal. I came back from Europe in 1974. My research work and visit to various sites and museums resulted in another book titled *Palaeolithic Europe* in 1978. Eventually I was awarded a D.Litt. on this book.

I will fail in my duties if I do not mention another saint who influenced my life. His name is Professor François Bordes. He was the director of a big Quaternary Research center in Bordaeux, south west France. I was basically centered in Germany and was very keen to visit Bordaeux to meet him who had not only excavated many important palaeolithic sites like Pech Dulazé and Combe Grenal but also proposed many pioneering methodological concepts. I did not know enough French to see me through. From Paris to Bordaeux and then Bordaeux to Talence where this institute was situated was for me a

variegated exercise in pantomime. But the moment I entered the gate of the university the guard stopped me. I showed him the letter of Prof. Bordes. The guard called the Professor and within 10 minutes he appeared, received me and took me to the guest house. He sat in every chair, sofa and the bed to see if they were alright. And a volley of French was thrown at the keeper of the guest house. I knew that he must have asked her to take special care of us and that she did.

Every day from 9:30 am to 5:30 pm, I was going through all the collection of classical sites. There used to be a break of 1½ hours within which I had to finish my lunch in staff canteen. Every day he would ask in detail what I ate. Suppose I said something like a thick tomato sauce, he would at once say ‘Oh that is called Ravioli, it is not typically French, it is adopted by us from Italy.’ Like this he would always tell me things for which France is famous. I was also given a long lecture on Bordaeux red wine which is exported to USA. Nobody in this big institute could speak English. So, I had to depend on Prof. Bordes, who could speak passable English. In spite of all his administrative, academic and teaching pre-occupations he would always find time for me. Although at times our discussion would go on till about dinner time. Sometimes he would take me to dinner in his house. In one such occasion, he prepared a handaxe and presented it to me. He took me in his own car to Les Eyzies, the citadel of prehistory of the world. He put us in a hotel, took me to important sites himself and explained their technical details. Like in Pune here also I stayed for 2 months and gathered so much knowledge that I had the courage to write a book on European prehistory and get it published from Humanities Press, USA. Prof. Bordes wrote the preface of the book wherein he gave me glorious tribute. Till now I must be the first non-white to write a book on Palaeo-history of the Europeans. Later I was awarded D. Litt. on this work. I am ever so grateful to this saint, who like H.D. Sankalia is no more. Simple life and extreme simplicity in behaviour are the crowns of these two gurus. I earnestly try to be like them in my actions and behaviour.

Finally, I shall try to provide some examples by which I try to relate archaeology to both physical and cultural anthropology.

David Pilbeam had proposed a “nut cracker” model as cause of evolution of the hominid. I developed this into a lecture titled “*Kahani ek dant kee*” (“The Story of a Tooth”). This became so famous that UGC created a 22 minute video of this. Another example of linking palaeolithic archaeology with human bio-cultural evolution can be argued for the inordinate increase of borers and eyed needles in Europe during Upper Palaeolithic. It appears that man changed to day time hunting during this period. This led to the loss of body hair and increase of sweat pores in them. Consequently covering oneself with animal skin was adopted to combat cold winters. Working with animal skin required tools like raclette and borers or eyed needles. The absence of these types in tropical areas like India further proved this point. This is only a single example

but one can use many such phenomena to link archaeological attributes with evolution.

In social anthropology as well we get in depth features of simple egalitarian system developing into complex societies. Here I will try to mention one specific example. Harappan archaeology is replete with description of antiquities. One can't also escape alluding of advancing Aryans and the pushing out of the Dravidian speakers. These fancy conclusions are derived from the analysis of mountains of antiquities, structures, seals, etc, yet barely any archaeologist talks about the possibility of the existence of a segmentary lineage system in the Harappan society. The repeating of the citadel and village pattern spread over thousands of kilometers certainly show a pattern which has often been missed. If anybody can consider the so-called great bath as a cow pen then the water faucets can be argued as designed for washing the cow dung. Cows are used as convertible surplus and hence a wealth which is cashable in need. Letters of Huentasang show that he was often told to remind Kings of the areas he was going to visit during his travel from north to east that they owe "so many cow herds to he returned." This primitive banking system also operating in Harappan society is a possibility worth consideration for archaeologists. As an anthropologist one finds this impossible to accept how such a huge number of bovid bones occur in an urban settlement which has no grazing ground. Consequently cows as wealth deposit become easy to conceive. Pre-occupation with zebu-ox in seals also appears like a logo like that of reserve bank of Harappan society.

As an anthropologist, I find it more fascinating than describing brick size and ceramic variability as chief characteristic of society. Anthropology can't be wished away in the rush of views coming from historians. We must not sacrifice the whole for the sake of the part.

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