

SHORTER NOTE

INDEBTEDNESS TO KOLKATA ANTHROPOLOGY

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Although it was during the vice-chancellorships of Devaprasad Sarvadhikary (31 March 1914 to 20 March 1918) and Lancelot Sanderson (31 March 1918 to 31 March 1919) that anthropology was introduced in the curriculum of Ancient History and Culture in 1918, the real inspiration for its introduction came from the Lion of Bengal, Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, the second Indian to head the University of Calcutta as its Vice Chancellor (from 31 March 1906 to 30 March 1914, and 4 April 1921 to 3 April 1923). In 1921 was opened the Calcutta University's Department of Anthropology which in the last ninety-seven years of its existence has made a majestic contribution to the growth of anthropology at national as well as international levels.

I remember as a student of anthropology in the University of Delhi from 1969 to 1974 that the visit of Bengal anthropologists to my department was always a celebratory occasion. The teaching was suspended on those days so that the students could attend their lectures. Catching a glimpse of these scholars whose books and articles we were reading as compulsory texts was a moment of providence. Our pride was boundless on learning that of the 154 usages of 'culture' that A.L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn compiled in their 1952 book, one of them was of N.K. Bose, the Gandhian scholar, who was the Director of the Anthropological Survey of India (1959-1964) and the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (1967-1970) (Sinha, 1986; Bhattacharjee, 2008).

For many, the Delhi Anthropology Department was an extension of the Calcutta anthropology, for its founder, Dr. P.C. Biswas, who also headed the Department from 1947 to 1968, earned his master's from Calcutta University, before he proceeded to Berlin for his doctorate. However, it was not true because Dr. Biswas was principally a biological anthropologist, bearing the imprint of German ethnology on him. For social anthropology thus, the Delhi Department looked at Kolkata for academic content, and also to those departments of anthropology in the country which the Kolkata-trained anthropologists started, of which Professor D.N. Majumdar, who was appointed a lecturer to teach 'primitive economics' in the Lucknow Economics Department, was a prominent name (Madan, ed., 2013).

Although Majumdar earned his doctoral degree from the University of Cambridge, he was well entrenched in Kolkata anthropology, blending its flavor with his originality. The other towering stalwarts of Lucknow, Professors R.K. Mukherjee and D.P. Mukerji, also had their moorings in Bengal scholarship (Joshi, 1986). In a nutshell, Indian anthropology, as is studied today, was considerably shaped by the intellectual currents from Bengal. In fact, André Bétéille, the Emeritus Professor of Sociology at Delhi, carried the nuances of Kolkata Anthropology forward in his work. He translated Bose's *Hindu Samajer Garan* (1949) in English in 1975, thus rendering another perspective on Indian society, besides the ones that M.N. Srinivas and Louis Dumont had popularized (Madan, 1994). Besides making a distinct mark on Indian anthropology with his incisive writings on sociological theory and contemporary India, Bétéille (2013) never forgot his formative training in Kolkata anthropology.

To a layperson, anthropology is mainly a study of the so-called 'tribal' societies, which on being cut-off from the wider world continue to live with their pristine customs and practices. Against this backdrop, it was also feared that anthropology would not have a legitimate reason to survive once the tribes were transformed, once they were de-tribalized because of their unremitting interactions with the outsiders, the members of the developed communities. Anthropology was also eventually accused of making valiant attempts of keeping the tribes 'unchanged' by arguing vociferously in favour of legally restricting their contacts with the mainstream of Indian society, so that their subject mitigated the fear of its extinction.

The Kolkata anthropology completely rejected this understanding. For it, a society was neither closed nor stationary. It was continuously changing, either because of its own internal forces, adapting to the changing habitat, or because of the exchange ties with the neighbouring communities. Society was not iron-clad; it was rather a process in time, a dynamic entity. Against this backdrop, the Kolkata anthropology ably showed the metamorphosis of tribes into castes, thus demonstrating the never-relaxing forces of integration in Indian civilization (Bose, 1953).

Tribes belonged to an age before literacy began. They recorded their past in their memory, transmitting it orally from one generation to the next. Because their past was unwritten, they were called 'ahistorical'. This encouraged their study as they were at a point in time, 'here and now', rather than as they had evolved over time (Kuper, ed., 1992). History was alien to this brand of anthropology.

By contrast, for Kolkata anthropology, India was not 'preliterate' or 'non-literate'. It was in fact a 'literate' civilization, providing a vast corpus of literature, systematically developed and meticulously transmitted over generations. Even when it became committed to writing, the traditional wisdom continued to be memorized and orally passed down.

All communities, barring a few island settlements, were a part of this long historical tradition. Indian civilization was not an 'ivory tower', where ideas were confined to narrow elite. Rather, its thoughts diffused to the public, semi-literate as well as illiterate. Thus, highly esoteric ideas found a place at the lower level. They were, however, simplified, made intelligible and accessible to all. In the words of James Scott (1990), a 'public transcript' of the ideas was created, thus integrating different strata of the society.

The Kolkata anthropology promoted an historical understanding of India. Tribes may have an autonomous existence, but they were part of history and civilization. To regard them as 'history-less' was an instance of our intellectual ethnocentrism and a strategy of domination. In that sense, the Kolkata anthropology was closer to their American counterparts than to the British. Because of its allegiance to a historical-civilizational approach, it could examine the transformation of tribes into castes, or the formation of tribal states, thus questioning the conception of tribes as stateless, prone to anarchy (Sinha, 1962). With this came respect for oral literature and an emphasis on the study of change. This also motivated a study of the same society at different time periods to see the direction of change and its products (Chaudhury, 2007).

Against this background, for Kolkata anthropology, the distinction between tribes, peasant, and cities was simply of analytical value. In reality, change was imminent and constant. Multiple identities precipitated at the same time. For instance, when a tribal worked in an industry, located on the outskirts of a city, he shared three identities – his primordial identity, of the industrial worker, and the urban dweller.

Hence, our commitment to study change would make us traverse all spaces, from tribal to urban. That was the reason why Bose and his colleagues embarked on a study of the 'cultural profile of Calcutta', a city of 'furious creative energy', in the words of Surajit Sinha (ed., 1972: 7). Incidentally when the study of Kolkata began, many thought that it was not anthropology, for the latter studied the 'changeless' tribal peoples. But once this research work was accomplished, the skeptics were convinced of the strength of anthropological methods in studying urban milieus and the situations of distress (like Bengal famine). Anthropology truly became a study of human society in general, rather than of a particular type of society, courtesy the efforts of Bengal anthropologists.

Bose (1972: 5) once remarked: 'An anthropologist does not merely play the part of an observer in the game of chess'. What he meant was that anthropologists engage themselves in action, endeavouring to initiate positive and long-lasting changes in the lives of people. They are not just idyllic watchers of human behaviour; they are the initiators of change. Radharaman Mitra, the famous author, said: 'Our intellectual efforts should ultimately lead to some kind of moral action' (see Sinha, ed., 1972: 262). This stream of thought

strongly believed that our thoughts and researches are nascent unless they guide a fruitful action of alleviating the sufferings of people. But, as Bose pointed out, we should not 'rush into action without adequate intellectual preparation' (see Sinha, ed., 1972: 262).

For Kolkata anthropology, theory and action were dialectically related. Theoretical work guided action, which in turn threw challenges before the theory, leading to its modification or even rejection. If anthropological work does not guide the practice of directed and planned changes, then it is sterile. This conviction led to many anthropologists working for the uplift of downtrodden communities, especially those whom the British called the 'Criminal Tribes'. One experiment that has caught the international attention was started by P.K. Bhowmik (1963) in Midnapur with the Lodha. It was one of the finest cases of putting anthropology into practice.

While we embark on celebrating the hundred years of anthropology in the country, it is time to put on record our eternal indebtedness to Kolkata anthropology.

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