

Western versus Indian Anthropology: A New Discourse

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Abstract

Indian anthropology, though established under the British rule had developed its own tradition of anthropological study. Some of the notable Indian anthropologists however critiqued their own anthropology as being colonial. In this paper, I have argued that quite remarkable anthropological studies were done by outstanding Indian anthropologists after the independence of the country, which encountered the major challenges of nation building, namely, resettlement of refugees after the partition of the country and development caused displacement by big dams and industrialisation.

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Introduction

The connection between Anthropology and colonialism and more recently with imperialism has been researched and critiqued by scholars (Gough, 1968; Asad, 1973; Stauder, 1974; Pathy, 1981; Price, 2011). The researchers, quite justifiably exposed the role of the anthropologists and their knowledge to put in their services for the colonial and imperial interests of the western countries. Starting from our founding parents like A.R.Radcliffe-Brown, B.Malinowski and Ruth Benedict to the lesser known military anthropologists of the cold war and post cold war era anthropologists were found to be engaged in assisting the colonial and imperialist powers at the global level. In India, on the other hand developed a critique, which viewed Indian anthropology mainly as a hangover of the British qua colonial anthropological tradition. In

this article, I would make an attempt to show that this at least in the case of Indian anthropology was not a fact supported by history. India, after all, had no colony to exploit. India was a colony of the British Empire and the first department of anthropology in India was established at the University of Calcutta during the British period but the Indian anthropologists, though influenced by the British and American anthropologists, they did develop a nationalist anthropology.

Colonial critique of Indian Anthropology

The colonial connection of anthropology, particularly British social anthropology virtually began with the publication of the famous book *Anthropology & the colonial encounter* edited by Talal Asad in 1973. Asad noted that 'social anthropology emerged as a distinctive discipline at the beginning of the colonial era', although most of the professional anthropologists showed a 'strange reluctance' to study the colonial connection of social anthropology (Asad 1973:14-15). More than a decade later an Indian social anthropologist and sociologist Jaganath Pathy in his article published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* critiqued anthropology in general and third world development anthropology in particular for serving the colonial and imperial powers ((Pathy 1981:623-627). Both Asad and Pathy however had their counterpoints too! Asad for example, stated at the end of his introduction:

I believe it is a mistake to view social anthropology in the colonial era as primarily an aid to colonial administration, or as the simple reflection of colonial ideology. I say this not because I subscribe to the anthropological establishment's comfortable view of itself, but because bourgeois consciousness, of which social anthropology is merely one fragment, has always contained within itself profound contradictions and ambiguities----- and therefore the potentialities for transcending itself (Asad 1973:18).

Pathy, after quoting Mao-ze-dong on the 'underlying principle of knowledge' concluded:

In the pursuit, the anthropologists should shed their value-neutrality and stop opposing large scale changes. The need is to transform anthropology from being an instrument of domination of the oppressors to becoming an instrument of liberation of the oppressed (Pathy 1981:627).

Neither Asad nor Pathy made any attempt to show how social anthropology or anthropology in countries in the post-colonial era could be put to use in a truly nationalist spirit to serve the interests of the oppressed by transcending itself from the colonial hangover.

Under this context it would be interesting to note that in India the critical assessment of the colonial legacy of anthropology by the anthropologists had an older beginning than that advanced by Talal Asad and Jaganath Pathy. Now I begin my narrative on the critique.

There is a standard critique of Indian anthropology advanced by some of the Indian anthropologists. The critics opined that Indian anthropology was the product of a colonial tradition and the Indian anthropologists for various reasons followed their colonial and neo-colonial masters in one way or the other. Let me try to arrange the critiques of Indian anthropology in a chronological manner.

A chronological description of the critiques

1. As early as 1952 Nirmal Kumar Bose in a significant article entitled 'Current research projects in Indian anthropology' published in *Man in India* enumerated the research projects undertaken by the Department of Anthropology, Govt. of India (the former name of the Anthropological Survey of India) and the anthropology departments at Calcutta, Madras, Lucknow, Delhi, Gauhati and Osmania universities. Bose's investigation was exhaustive and based on written replies from the Heads of the aforementioned institutions. After reviewing the overall scenario he concluded

There does not seem to be any problem which Indian anthropologists have made peculiarly their own. Anthropology in our country have, on the whole, followed the tracks beaten by anthropologists in the more powerful countries of the West. What they do, we generally try to repeat on the Indian soil (Bose 1952:133).

Bose however ended with the positive note that there were exceptions to the above generalisation and if Indian anthropologists could work independently on Indian problems, there was still sign of hope. Just after 10 years N.K. Bose published another article 'Researches in Indian anthropology' in the same journal in which he turned the attention of the readers from applied to 'certain fundamental problems in anthropology' and mentioned about the researches done by the social anthropologists on the persistence of the caste system. Along with this Bose mentioned the anthropometric surveys carried out by the physical anthropologists at the all-India level as another type of fundamental research and he found young anthropologists at the Anthropological Survey of India as 'first-class workers' (Bose 1962:179).

2. After Bose, his famous student Surajit Sinha in his insightful article published in the *Journal of the Indian Anthropological Society* (hereafter *JIAS*) in 1971 observed that despite considerable growth in research publications and professional human power in social and cultural anthropology during the last 100 years, the Indian anthropologists largely remained dependent on western and colonial traditions (Sinha 1971: 1-14). In continuation of his pertinent examination of the colonial dependence of Indian anthropology, Sinha contributed a full chapter entitled 'India: A Western Apprentice' in a book, *Anthropology: Ancestors and Heirs*, edited by the Marxist anthropologist Stanley Diamond in 1980 published by Mouton. In that article Sinha discussed 'the process of naturalization of the different strands of Western anthropological traditions' and finally ended with a pessimistic note:

For some time, the proliferation of trained manpower, random efforts at catching up with the latest developments in the West and a general increase in the number of publications will characterize the development of Indian anthropology (Sinha, 1980: 281).

Trained by both Nirmal Kumar Bose and Tarak Chandra Das and also at a later stage by Robert Redfield, Sinha was exposed to a wide arena of global and national anthropology. He completed his major works on the relationship between tribe and caste in the context of Indian civilisation as well as state formation by mid 1960s. A closer view of his published works revealed that he first presented the critical idea on Indian anthropology in a Wenner-Gren Foundation conference held in New York in 1968 (Sinha 1968). In fact, Sinha's self-critical views on the growth of Indian social science in general

and anthropology and sociology in particular could be traced back to his article entitled 'Involvement in social change: a plea for own ideas' published in the radical social science journal *Economic and Political Weekly* as early as 1967 (Sinha 1967:1707-1709). In this article Sinha stated quite categorically:

A scholarly tradition of leaning heavily, if not abjectly, on ideas borrowed from the West is growing in this country. This is clear from the post-independence writings of a large number of Indian social scientists and the research policies of some of our modern research institutions. The borrowed ideas and concepts, when accepted uncritically, obscure the major issues involved in planned social change and stand in the way of posing the right kind of questions in the study of social change (Ibid 1707).

Sinha pursued this critique of Indian social science by converging his attack on Indian anthropology in the subsequent articles. Taking note of his earlier article in the *JIAS*, Sinha in his 'Foreword' of the precious book *Bibliographies of Eminent Indian Anthropologists* (1974) written by Shyamal Kumar Ray, made a remark:

.... there was a general reluctance among Indian scholars to take due note of the research publications of Indian pioneers and contemporaries. As a result, research endeavours of Indian scholars tend to be derivative, leaving the responsibilities of breaking new grounds exclusively to western scholars (Sinha 1974: iii).

Although Sinha praised N.K.Bose and T.C.Das at the individual levels for their insight and ethnography respectively the critiques advanced by Sinha in his 1967, 1971 and 1980 articles on the overall achievement of Indian anthropology was quite pessimistic and distressing. For him, there was hardly any sign of an independent, let alone nationalist Indian anthropology. In his article entitled 'Urgent Problems for Research in Social and Cultural Anthropology in India: Perspectives and Suggestions' published in *Sociological Bulletin* in 1968 Sinha identified three distinct social anthropological 'vantage points' to approach the urgent problems in India, which were: (i) study of 'Primitive Groups' of tribes, (ii) study of human groups for the theoretical understanding of Indian society and (iii) anthropological study of problems urgently needed for national reconstruction and development. Curiously, Sinha left the third area untouched for the purpose of the paper (Sinha 1968:123-131). It was not clear why he had done so and what purpose prevented him to undertake discussion on this vital area. More interestingly, few years later Sinha wrote in the Foreword of the book *Bibliographies of eminent Indian Anthropologists*:

We are also impressed by the fact that these pioneering scholars, often working under severe limitations of resources, were engaged in life-long endeavour in their particular areas of academic interest. Each of them demonstrated a rare quality of mental independence while living most of their lives under colonial rule (Sinha 1974: iii).

Surajit Sinha never came up with a comprehensive and overall review of the results of the 'mental independence' of his predecessors who lived their 'lives under colonial rule'. He seemed to satisfy himself only with the praise of N.K.Bose and occasionally T.C.Das.

3. Next to Sinha came the critique of Amitava Basu and Suhas Biswas who held professorial positions at the prestigious Indian Statistical Institute at Kolkata. In their article, '*Is Indian Anthropology Dead/Dying*' published in the *Journal of the Indian Anthropological Society*, they raised the question of social relevance of Indian anthropology squarely and concluded that the subject was either dead or dying in the post-colonial period (Basu and Biswas 1980:1-4). More interestingly, some commentators (e.g. V.Balakrishnan, P.P.Majumder and D.Piplai, 1980, pp. 4-5, 9-10 & 11-12) on the paper disagreed with Basu and Biswas and argued that anthropology in India was very much useful for the ruling and privileged classes and might not be useful for the masses!

4. One of the most sarcastic critiques of Indian social anthropology was written by A.C.Sinha in his article 'Indian social anthropology and its Cambridge connections' published in 1991 in *The Eastern Anthropologist*. In this article Sinha argued, and with archival evidence that many of the Indian doyens of social anthropology and sociology depended largely on British anthropologists for the improvement in their personal careers. In Sinha's list there were names of B.S.Guha, M.N.Srinivas, Ramkrishna Mukherjee, D.N.Majumdar, S.C.Dube, and N.Prasad. I quote him below:

One finds pompous Guha, the recently appointed academic bureaucrat, looking for approval to his uncertain blue-prints. One also notes that Srinivas, Mukherjee, Majumdar, Dube, Narmadeshwar Prasad--- all aspiring sociologists and social anthropologists--- the would be Mandarins--- who were destined to steer through the Indian sociological establishment for at least three decades in post-1950 period--- behaving in the same "comical and pathetic ways" for securing an approving nod from their Cambridge establishment (Sinha 1991:351-352).

Sinha however did not explore further to see how this dependence on Cambridge establishment influenced the academic contributions of the Indian social anthropologists.

5. Celebrated Social Anthropologist and Sociologist André Béteille in one of his articles published in the *Sociological Bulletin* in 1997 wrote:

In India, each generation of sociologists seems eager to start its work on a clean slate, with little or no attention to the work done before. This amnesia about the work of their predecessors is no less distinctive of Indian sociologists than their failure to innovate (Béteille 1997:98).

Béteille's observation on Indian sociologists however, was not novel. long before his pronouncement, N.K. Bose and Surajit Sinha critiqued Indian anthropologists almost in the same manner, which I have already mentioned.

6. After about two decades of Sinha, another anthropologist, Biswanath Debnath in his article published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, castigated Indian anthropologists for failing to evolve their own tradition and blindly following the footsteps of the colonial masters by studying small, isolated and marginal tribal communities and their process of integration in the mainstream Indian civilisation (Debnath, 1999:3110-3114). Almost the same kind of shrill voice on the purported neo-colonial bias in Indian anthropology can be found in the writings of J.J.Roy-Burman in 2011 (Roy-Burman, 2011).

7. In a recent article published in *Economic and Political Weekly* Vivek Kumar, a professor of Sociology at Jawaharlal Nehru University in his article 'How Egalitarian Is Indian Sociology?' observed a higher caste bias in Indian Sociology and Social Anthropology (Kumar 2017:33-39).

Interestingly, none of these critiques were forwarded by any western anthropologist or sociologist and all the critiques were put forward by professionals who earned or are earning their livelihood by practicing sociology and/ or anthropology in India.

8. In a more academic vein, R.Srivatsan argued in his *Economic and Political Weekly* article that the dominant discourse among the anthropologists and sociologists on tribal policy in India had changed little from the colonial times to the emergence of nationalism in the early post-independent years (Srivatsan 1986:1986-1999).

The critics of Indian Anthropology (Bose, Sinha, Basu, Bêteille and Debnath) ignored the materialistic, socially committed, secular and nationalist trends of Indian anthropology which was growing in the hands of some remarkable anthropologists before and after independence of the country (Guha 2018 & 2019). The critics have only followed the smart way to criticise the pioneers instead of studying the socially committed works of the latter and this was one of the reasons that Indian anthropologists failed to honour their nationalist predecessors and depended more on the wisdom of the Western scholars. At best the critics have only paid lip-service to those nationalist pioneers of the discipline.

Contributions of the Indian anthropologists towards nation-building

One of the important areas in which anthropologists have consistently contributed was the bio-cultural study of ethnic minorities, variously labeled as *tribes*, *aboriginals*, *autochthones*, *indigenous communities* and *adivasis*. A related area of focus of the anthropologists was the marginalised condition of these communities and also about how to ameliorate the condition of these communities and integrate them in the mainstream of the Indian nation in the post-independence period of the country. It is important to note that the contributions of the anthropologists towards nation building in the post-independence period of India were hardly considered to be important by the planners and policy makers partly because of the nature of the discipline and in part owing to the avoidance of the anthropologists in situating their micro-level studies in the wider macro context of the nation. Therefore, the detailed empirical studies on particular tribes, castes and villages made little sense to the planners of mega five year plans of the country. Anthropologists were definitely regarded as experts on tribal policy at the national level but compared to economists their presence in nation building or national planning was marginal. Even when the value of anthropological methodology of conducting in-depth field based studies were understood, it was practically not feasible for the government to engage sufficient number of trained anthropologists to make plans for displaced persons affected by famine, partition, industrialisation or dam building in the country by properly assessing the micro-level social impacts of these mega events occurring in post-colonial India. Anthropologists also were largely satisfied with their position as experts on tribes, pursuing their professional and technical research on particular communities across the length and breadth of the country long after independence. As a consequence, the Indian anthropologists remained on the margins of nation building, pursuing their micro-level studies on tribes and some

caste populations sometime almost in the fashion of their colonial masters either from the Anthropological Survey of India or from various university departments.

Under this general scenario of anthropological discourse around nation building a specific focus could also be discerned in the works of the anthropologists in India. This focus was centered towards the (i) displacement and resettlement of populations caused by famine, (ii) partition of the country on religious grounds during independence and (iii) industrialisation and dam building by the State in the initial years of mega-planning under the first and second five years plans. All the three events, i.e. *famine*, *partition* and *mega-development efforts* (industrialisation and dam building) were inseparable from nation building, and policy makers needed anthropological advocacy and insight to deal with the problems arising out of displacement caused by partition and mega-development efforts. Definitely, the anthropological interventions in these mega events of nation building were miniscule in proportion to the nationwide magnitude of those episodes. But in terms of the intensive nature and quality of the micro-level findings, the anthropological studies on refugee resettlement and rehabilitation of development caused displaced persons offer a new area around the discourse on nationalism, so far untouched by historians, economists and political scientists.

For the purpose of this paper towards the exploration of anthropological discourses around resettlement and rehabilitation of famine affected destitutes, refugees of partition and development project affected populations, I would mention five pioneering studies conducted by eminent anthropologists who made important contributions in solving the aforementioned problems encountered by independent India. All the studies were published after the independence of the country and except the study on Bengal famine by Tarak Chandra Das the rest of the studies were conducted within the span of the first four five year plans of India during 1951-1974. I enumerate the studies below in their chronological order.

1. *Bengal Famine (1943): As Revealed in a Survey of the Destitutes of Calcutta*(1949) by Tarak Chandra Das. The University of Calcutta.
2. *Resettlement of East Pakistan Refugees in Andaman Islands: Report on Survey of Further Possibilities of Resettlement* (1955) by Surajit Chandra Sinha. Govt. of West Bengal.
3. *Studies in Social Tensions Among the Refugees From Eastern Pakistan*(1959) by B.S.Guha. Department of Anthropology. Govt. of India.
4. *Social Processes in the Industrialization of Rourkela (With Reference to Displacement and Rehabilitation of Tribal and Other Backward People)* (1961) by B.K. Roy Burman. Office of the Registrar General, India.
5. *A Survey of the People Displaced Through the Koyna Dam*(1969), by Irawati Karve and Jai Nimbkar. Deccan College: Poona.

The first common feature of these anthropological studies was that except the study done by T.C.Das on Bengal Famine, all of them were commissioned and sponsored either by the central or the state government of independent India which engaged anthropologists on matters related to displacement and resettlement. Das's study was funded partly in its later stage by the University of Calcutta. The second feature of these studies was that they were not specifically directed to any particular ethnic minority or community, as had been done by the anthropologists by following the colonial tradition, but to the populations affected by partition and development processes. The third common denominator of these studies was

their focus on the collection of both social and biological data (read demographic) and the creation of a solid empirical database. In all these studies the main objective of the authors was to collect, organise and analyse quantitative and qualitative data on the problem, which they wanted to investigate. Fourth, the analyses of the data were also done not to test or generate any theory or hypothesis as regards the human populations, societies and cultures involved in the processes but to collect concrete factual materials on the ground realities of displacement of human populations in the newly independent nation. Fifth, in all the studies we find that the anthropologists innovatively employed their traditional methods (participant observation, genealogy, case study etc.) to large populations. Finally, these studies were done not for seeking pure knowledge but to generate policies around the major challenges encountered by the planners of the newly independent country in the post-colonial period. In short, these studies can be viewed as sincere attempts by the anthropologists towards the making of a new nation and that still remains outside the mainstream debates and discussion around nation building by the social scientists and even by the anthropologists themselves.

Conclusion

Existing works though contained a lot of useful data on the history of anthropology during the colonial and post-colonial periods but they did not venture into a search for the growth of nationalist anthropological writings by the Indian anthropologists or the role of the anthropologists in nation building in the pre and post independence periods.

Along with the colonial tradition, a nationalist trend in Indian anthropology could also be discerned which was growing during the pre and post-independence periods in India and this trend was characterised by the works of the anthropologists who were socially committed and contributed to nation building through their analytical writings and research. These anthropologists learned the methodology of the discipline from the west but did not become blind followers of Europe and America and they also did not want to derive their anthropology from the religious scriptures of the ancient Hindus. Instead, they visualised an Indian character of anthropology, which according to them could be used in nation building, a task which finally could not develop into full maturity by their own successors.

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