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Social-Cultural Anthropology in the Oldest Department of Anthropology in India: Writing History or the Suppression of Records?

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Abstract

The recent narration of the history of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Calcutta (CU) by a world renowned social scientist, Partha Chatterjee in a lecture at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences misrepresented and suppressed historical records. Chatterjee's contention that the Department of Anthropology at CU only practiced Physical Anthropology and Archaeology and not Social-Cultural Anthropology was highly biased and suppressed the records available in the public domain.

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Introduction

In a recent lecture delivered on 15 May 2023 at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences (CSSS), Kolkata, Partha Chatterjee, the former Director of CSSS narrated the history of the oldest Department of Anthropology in India at the University of Calcutta. The lecture was entitled 'Science or Cultural Interpretation: Anthropology at the University of Calcutta, 1920-1970.' The summary of the lecture was available in the public domain at <https://twitter.com/CSSSCal> at the

time of writing this article (Chatterjee 2023). The lecture abstract was posted on 10 May 2023 from the official twitter account of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Kolkata signed by its Director and had 10.6K views and 125 likes on 21.06.2023. In the aforesaid lecture, Chatterjee, who was one of the major collaborators of Ranajit Guha and his subaltern school of history, depicted the works of the anthropologists of the University of Calcutta in a highly biased and partial manner.

Partha Chatterjee's biased views

In Chatterjee's words:

The Anthropology Department at the University of Calcutta was established in 1920. Since there were no trained Indian anthropologists available, the first teachers came from the Ancient Indian History department and taught prehistory and archaeology. When they began to carry out their own research, the early members of the department became involved in debates over the racial classification of the Indian population. The curriculum too put a strong emphasis on theories of race and methods of anthropometry. Students from the department went on to get higher degrees abroad and became leading figures in physical anthropology at Delhi, Lucknow and the Anthropological Survey (Chatterjee 2023).

The only sentence, which Chatterjee made on the practice of social-cultural anthropology at the Calcutta University anthropology department, was as follows:

Alongside, there was a somewhat minor stream of cultural anthropology, developed by the Gandhian scholar-activist Nirmal Kumar Bose (Chatterjee 2023).

This description gives an impression that social-cultural anthropology (a minor stream in Chatterjee's words), a very important branch of anthropology, was neither taught nor studied at the University of Calcutta like physical anthropology nor were students trained in intensive fieldwork (not much required in physical anthropology) in this branch of anthropology. The records however were far away from the assertions of Partha Chatterjee!

Methodology

Two questions of methodology may be raised at this juncture. First, since the abstract of Partha Chatterjee's oral lecture was posted in a social media, it should not be used as a valid reference in a written article (personal communication with Partha Chatterjee over email dated 08.07.2023).

The second question is, it was only an abstract, not a full article, so it should not be considered as a source for a full length article published in print.

My answer to the first question is, posts in twitter are frequently been made by the Presidents and Prime Ministers of almost all the countries of the world (India included) to make various official announcements and statements. So, there is no valid reason for not considering Partha Chatterjee's abstract in the twitter on the history of anthropology at Calcutta University as an authentic source of information and it was signed by the Director of the aforesaid institute(personal communication with Partha Chatterjee over email dated 09.07.2023).

My answer to the second question is since an abstract summarises the content of a lecture or paper it is unlikely that an author would talk or write on matters and develop arguments which would contradict the subject matter described in its abstract. A paper and/or a lecture is an elaboration of the abstract. So, we can safely assume that whatever Partha Chatterjee had stated in the abstract was elaborated and explained further in his lecture. With these two methodological points, we may now proceed on to our main facts and arguments.

Remarkable social-cultural anthropologists of the University of Calcutta

Anthropology department at the University of Calcutta from its very inception emphasised and practiced the discipline from a holistic perspective, and teaching and research were being done in all the three major sub-disciplines of the subject, viz. (i) physical anthropology, (ii) social-cultural anthropology and (iii) prehistoric archaeology. André Bétaille, the famous sociologist who was trained in anthropology at the University of Calcutta in his undergraduate and postgraduate levels in the 1950s recounted in his autobiographical account in the *Annual Review of Anthropology*.

The half-dozen teachers we had covered all branches of the subject: paleontology, prehistoric archaeology, material culture, religion and magic, and social organization. One of the teachers had a special interest in museology, so he talked endlessly about museum methods. Yet a teacher was not necessarily bad because he was self-taught and did not have original research publications. One of those who taught us about society and culture, Mr. T.C. Das, was meticulous and conscientious and had a vast store of detailed ethnographic knowledge (Bétaille 2013:4).

Another internationally famous anthropologist who held the positions of the Director, Anthropological Survey of India and the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta was Surajit Sinha who also earned his M.Sc. degree in anthropology from the University of Calcutta during the late 1940s specialised in social-cultural anthropology. Sinha was rigorously trained in fieldwork in social-cultural anthropology at the University of Calcutta by T.C.Das who was his teacher. Let us hear in Sinha's own words:

In March, 1950 late Professor Tarak Chandra Das suggested to me that I should take up a study of the Bhumij tribe, an off-shoot of the Munda of Ranchi District, since this tribe has been drawn very near to the caste system by the process of acculturation..... Professor Das had also published a short monograph on the Bhumij of Seraikella in 1931. Professor Das suggested to me that my enquiry should be mainly based on intensive field

study of a Bhumij dominated village in Manbhum district of Bihar where they were already reported in the Census as caste and spoke Bengali, having lost their original Mundari language (Sinha 1978:149-150).

The above quotation clearly showed that Surajit Sinha was not doing his studies on physical anthropology, and much later in an article published in 1971 Sinha observed that his teacher T.C. Das tried to rigorously develop field methods in social-cultural anthropology in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Calcutta, which could be 'fruitfully utilized in describing the living conditions of tribals, peasants as well as urbanites' (Sinha 1971:7). T.C. Das's social anthropological monograph on the Purum Kukis of Manipur entitled *The Purums: An Old Kuki Tribe of Manipur*, published by the Calcutta University in 1945, became a major source of database in the acrimonious debate on descent versus alliance theories on kinship in Anglo-American Anthropology that involved renowned anthropologists like Claude Lévi-Strauss, George Homans, David Schneider, Rodney Needham, Floyd Lounsbury, and others (Guha 2011:256). Das's other book on the Bengal famine of 1943 (see Das 1949) was a unique and rare first-hand study done by any anthropologist or social scientist on the victims of one of the greatest tragedies of our country under the colonial rule (Guha 2010:90-94). An earlier version of the book was discussed in the then British Parliament and some of the recommendations advanced by Das were adopted in 1944 by the Famine Inquiry Commission formed by the colonial government for the prevention of future famines in India (*ibid.*: iii-iv). Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in his book *The Discovery of India* also mentioned the anthropological survey conducted by Das on the famine-affected population of Bengal and, even before the book was published, expressed his confidence on the results of the survey in contrast to the one carried out by the government (Nehru 1981/1946: 495–96). The Nobel Laureate economist Amartya Sen has also used Das's original work several times in his famous book *Poverty and Famines* (Sen 1999).

T.C. Das was not the lone social anthropologist at the University of Calcutta during 1930-60. Another very talented social-cultural anthropologist was Kshitish Prasad Chattopadhyay who was one of most distinguished anthropologists of India. He was born on 15th December 1897 and had a brilliant academic career. He earned a First Class Honours degree in Physics from the University of Calcutta. In 1919, he went to United Kingdom and took his admission at Cambridge University in Physics and began his studies under famous physicists like Thompson and Rutherford. But soon he changed his subject and obtained his Masters degree in anthropology in 1922. He came in contact with the famous British anthropologist W.H.R. Rivers, who was his teacher and Chattopadhyay was awarded the Anthony Wilkins Fellowship to carry out his research on the Newar community of Nepal. The fellowship was later withdrawn because of his activities with the Indian Seamen's Union (London), which were regarded as objectionable and he was not allowed to visit Nepal for his fieldwork by the then colonial government (Hutton 1963:155-156). He came back to India in 1922 with M.A. degree in anthropology from Cambridge University (IJCS 1964:111-112). During 1937-1962 K.P. Chattopadhyay served as the Head of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Calcutta in its formative phase. During this period the department flourished in all the three major subdisciplines of Anthropology, namely, physical anthropology, prehistoric archaeology and social-cultural anthropology. In 1955, the Department of Anthropology at the University of Calcutta was chosen by the University and the UNESCO to hold a conference on the *Study of Changes in Traditional Culture* and with the able academic and administrative leadership of K.P. Chattopadhyay the conference was not only held most successfully but the whole proceedings of the conference along with the discussions were also meticulously recorded and

published in the form of a book by the University of Calcutta in 1957. Under the encouraging guidance of Chattopadhyay many of his students and teachers acclaimed national and international recognitions (Chattopadhyay 2000:1-7). Some of his students who later became famous at the national and international arenas were Ramkrishna Mukherjee, Surajit Sinha, B.K. RoyBurman, André Béteille and many others. K.P.Chattopadhyay was an anthropologist with nationalist and humanist spirit who dedicated himself to the welfare of humanity. In an obituary of Chattopadhyay, which was published in *Man*, an eminent British social anthropologist noted:

Apart from his academic work he was always active in promoting the welfare of his fellow men. As a student in England he had worked among seamen in the East End of London; in India the free primary education system in Calcutta was largely his work: as Treasurer of the People's Relief Committee, famine relief and rehabilitation work in the rural areas of Bengal owed much to him, and during the communal riots of 1946 he organized a 'Peace Corps' to restore order (Hutton 1963:155-156).

Another doyen of Social-Cultural Anthropology at the Department of Anthropology in the University of Calcutta was Nirmal Kumar Bose (1901-1972). Bose was a versatile personality in Indian anthropology. His multifaceted interest ranged from temple architecture and prehistory to transformations in tribal life under the impact of Hinduism and modernization. Bose was a professor at the University of Calcutta and his famous textbook *Cultural Anthropology and other essays* was published as early as 1929. None of the chapters in this book dealt with physical anthropology and archaeology. The book started with an article on 'Cultural Anthropology' which dealt with the basics of social-cultural anthropology and traversed through the 'Spring festival of India', 'Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption', 'Tribal Welfare' and 'Training in the Field Sciences' all written for the students and others interested in the culture history of India (Bose 1953). Bose was Director of the Anthropological Survey of India and Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Government of India, and he was also a dedicated social worker, a Gandhian political activist, and above all a prolific writer in Bengali and English on diverse topics in professional journals, popular magazines and newspapers (a complete bibliography containing the full references of Bengali and English articles of N.K. Bose and his short life sketch can be found in Ray 1974:61-120); he served as the secretary of Mahatma Gandhi. Baidyanath Saraswati viewed Nirmal Kumar Bose as the 'Gandhian anthropologist' (Sraswati 2003:1-26) while R.S. Negi in his 7th N.K. Bose memorial lecture at *Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts* mentioned that Raj Mohan Gandhi described Bose as a 'left leaning anthropologist' (Negi 2013:1).

Suffice it to say that with a social-cultural anthropologist, like Surajit Sinha trained by teachers like T.C. Das, K.P. Chattopadhyay and N.K. Bose, Kolkata anthropology reached global standards along with physical anthropology and prehistory. Partha Chatterjee badly missed all these historical records.

Kolkata anthropology viewed from outside

In a recently published article in the famous journal founded by D.N. Majumdar, *The Eastern Anthropologist*, a former Director and a Delhi University professor Vinay Kumar Srivastava recollected:

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 (Srivastava 2018:453).

In the rest of the article Vinay Srivastava showed that social-cultural anthropology in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Calcutta was a pioneer in rejecting the older anthropological notion of treating tribal societies as static and isolated and it was Kolkata social anthropology, which 'promoted an historical understanding of India' (Ibid 2018:455). Kolkata social anthropology continued its viable existence through the 1970s and 80s in its practice towards the upliftment of the underprivileged and marginalised communities, which according to Vinay Srivastava was best exemplified by the works of Proboodh Kumar Bhowmick of the department on the Lodha community who were designated as a 'Criminal Tribe' by the British colonial administration (Ibid 2018:456 and also see Bhowmick 1981:6-8).

Going further back in the time scale

The first Department of Anthropology was established at Calcutta University in 1920 by the famous Indian Vice-Chancellor, Sir Asutosh Mukhopadhyay and Ananthakrishna Ayer (a pioneering Indian anthropologist) was its Head of the Department. Famous Indian Anthropologists, mostly trained outside India was the founder teachers in the Department. Ramaprasad Chanda, Panchanan Mitra, B.S.Guha, K.P. Chattopadhyaya, T.C.Das, N.K.Bose, D.Sen, S.S.Sarkar and many others developed a strong empirical tradition of Anthropology in India characterised by fieldwork in social-cultural anthropology and anthropometry in physical anthropology. The thrust on a holistic approach was the cardinal feature of anthropology in India. In contrast to Europe, Indian anthropologists paid more importance to the collection of data from the field rather than on building theories. I will now narrate the social anthropological works of the pioneering anthropologists at the Department of Anthropology in the University of Calcutta.

1. L.K.A. Anantha Krishna Ayer (1861-1937) was in charge of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Calcutta from 1920—1933 and he delivered a series of lectures on "Ethnography of India" at the University of Calcutta. Ayer did his major works on Social-Cultural Anthropology which included papers on Nayar polyandry and religious prostitution (Ray 1974:5-6).
2. Sarat Chandra Mitra(1863-1938) was the first Professor of Anthropology at the Department of Anthropology in the University of Calcutta in 1921(Sen Gupta 1965:54). He published numerous research articles on folklore and social-cultural anthropology. His nationalist spirit was best reflected in his writings on Indian mythology and he made pioneering efforts to introduce nature study in the school curriculum as early as 1911(Mitra 1911:48-64).
3. Ramaprasad Chanda(1873-1942) worked as a faculty for a brief period at the Department of Anthropology at the

University of Calcutta during 1920-21. He was a scholar in archaeology who worked in archaeology, physical anthropology and social-cultural anthropology. Apart from working on physical anthropology and archaeology, Chanda published on Indo-Aryan migrations, race and caste, and inter-caste marriage in Buddhist India (Ray 1974:23-24).

4. Haran Chandra Chakladar(1874-1958) was an eminent anthropologist who joined the Department of Anthropology, Calcutta University in 1920 and retired in 1937. Chakladar's books and papers on the social life in ancient India as revealed in Vatsayana's *Kamasutra* and the socio-economic conditions of the Bengal peasantry under the colonial exploitative system of indigo cultivation were stark examples of the then practice of social-cultural anthropology with the help of archival records (Chakladar 1905 & 1929).
5. Panchanan Mitra(1892-1936) was a professor of anthropology at the University of Calcutta. He was among the first Indians to study at Yale University and conducted several anthropological expeditions in India and abroad. He was the head of the Department of Anthropology of the University of Calcutta and is mostly known for his pioneering book *Prehistoric India* as early as 1923. This book which was the first of its kind by any Indian scholar showed the antiquity, richness and diversity of the culture of humankind in the Indian subcontinent long before the advent of scripts. He is still the lone Indian anthropologist who wrote a book on the history of American Anthropology in 1933 (Bose 2006:1439). This book was published by the University of Calcutta. The different chapters of the book clearly revealed that Mitra viewed anthropology in America as a holistic discipline, which studied the biological and cultural dimensions of human beings. Mitra discussed in detail the contributions of Lewis Henry Morgan, Franz Boas and Alfred Kroeber and traced the simultaneous development of anthropology and the various museums studying cultures and societies of the indigenous peoples in the New World (Mitra 1933).

Conclusion

It is not true that the Department of Anthropology at the University of Calcutta did not practice social-cultural anthropology as viewed by Partha Chatterjee, who holds the position of a professor of [anthropology](#) in South Asian studies at [Columbia University](#) in New York USA ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Partha_Chatterjee_\(scholar\)#cite_note-cssscal-3](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Partha_Chatterjee_(scholar)#cite_note-cssscal-3) accessed on 26.06.2023). Chatterjee ignored internationally famous researches done by a generation of social-cultural anthropologists who either taught or were trained in this vital sub-discipline of anthropology. He also missed the contributions of pioneering social-cultural anthropologists like L.K. Ananthakrishna Iyer (1861-1937), Sarat Chandra Mitra(1863-1938), Ramaprasad Chanda(1873-1942), Panchanan Mitra(1892-1936), and Haran Chandra Chakladar(1874-1968) who taught and trained students on the history and diversity of cultures and social organisation at this 100 year old Department of Anthropology in India(Guha 2023). They were the pioneers in building a true nationalist anthropology for India (Sinha 1974: iii; Guha 2022) and Chatterjee did not give due recognition to them. Sad enough!

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