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## In Search of a Nationalist Anthropology in India

ABHIJIT GUHA

### Introduction

**R**esearch on the history of anthropology in India unlike that in western countries has not yet become a formidable tradition. Existing works contain a lot of useful data on the history of anthropology during the colonial and post-colonial periods but they do 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. On the other hand, we find critiques of Indian anthropology, which found a colonial hangover in Indian anthropology. Within this context I shall argue that along with the colonial tradition, a nationalist trend in Indian anthropology can also be discerned, which was growing during the pre-and-post-independence periods in India and this trend was represented by the works of the anthropologists who were socially committed and contributed to nation-building through their analytical writings and research.

### Critiques of Indian anthropology

There is a standard critique of Indian anthropology advanced by some eminent Indian anthropologists. The critics held that Indian anthropology is the product of a colonial tradition and the Indian anthropologists for various reasons followed their colonial masters in one way or the other.

As early as 1952 Nirmal Kumar Bose (a doyen of Indian anthropology) 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 of 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 has, 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.

After Bose, his famous student Surajit Sinha in his insightful article published in the *Journal of the Indian Anthropological Society* 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 and 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).

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'.

#### **Nationalist anthropology**

In an important book entitled *Anthropology in the East*, Patricia Uberoi, Nandini Sundar and Satish Deshpande in the subsection 'Nationalism and the Nation-State' of the 'Introduction' commented,

We are yet to form a detailed picture of the ways in which nationalism exerted its influence in shaping Indian sociology and social anthropology. To be sure, almost every historical account of the discipline, whether it concerns an individual, an institution or the discipline at large, makes mention of this factor.... (Uberoi, Sundar & Deshpande 2007: 38).

In the discussion that followed the above quoted opening statement, the authors admitted two important points, first, that the question of nationalism occupied a 'very wide spectrum' and secondly, no Indian anthropologist or sociologist did oppose nationalism. I do not claim that I have been able to cover the whole range of the nationalist spectrum of Indian anthropology but I could only discover some of the notable nationalist anthropologists and highlight their works in some detail just as a beginning.

Along with the colonial tradition, a nationalist trend in Indian anthropology could also be discerned that was growing during the pre and post-independence periods in India and this trend was represented by the works of the anthropologists who were socially committed and contributed to nation building through their analytical writings and research (Guha 2018:8). 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, however, finally could not develop into full maturity in the hands of their own successors.

As early as 1938, one of the founding fathers of Indian anthropology, Sarat Chandra Roy wrote an article entitled 'An Indian Outlook on Anthropology' in *Man*, the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland. This article can be regarded as one of the pioneering ones which attempted to build up a nationalist tradition of Indian anthropology. In this article Roy not only critically evaluated the major theories developed in the

then western anthropology, like evolutionism, diffusionism and functionalism with much scepticism but he also made a novel attempt to synthesize the ideas of ancient Indian philosophers in western anthropological concepts. According to Roy, the essence of Indian thought lay in the subjective process of 'sympathetic immersion' in other cultures and societies and this could be combined with the objective approach of Western anthropology. I quote Roy,

Thus the objective methods of investigation of cultural data have to be helped out, not only by historical imagination and a background of historical and geographical facts, but also by a subjective process of self-forgetting absorption or meditation (*dhyāna*) and *intuition* born of sympathetic immersion in, and self-identification with, the society under investigation.

The spread of this attitude by means of anthropological study can surely be a factor helping forward the large *unity-in-diversity-through-sympathy* that seems to an Indian mind to be the inner meaning of the process of human evolution, and the hope of a world perplexed by a multitude of *new* and violent contacts, notably between Eastern and Western civilizations (Roy 1938:150).

One may note that Roy did not bring in any Hindu religious connotation to this method. For him, the Indian way of reaching the Universal through a sympathetic understanding of particular cultures through tolerance and love could build up a national character which would not try to shape the different peoples and cultures in a uniform pattern. In Roy's words,

The better minds of India are now harking back to the old ideal of culture as a means of the progressive realization of the one

Universal Self in all individual-and group-selves, and the consequent elevation or transformation of individual and 'national' character and conduct, through a spirit of universal love. The anthropological attitude while duly appreciating and fostering the varied self-expression of the Universal Spirit in different communities and countries, and not by any means seeking to mould them all in one universal racial or cultural pattern, is expected to help forward a synthesis of the past and the present, the old and the new, the East and the West (Ibid).

Sarat Chandra Roy's approach to develop a nationalist anthropology in India was not a simple theoretical exercise. One should remember that he was the first Indian who founded the second professional journal of anthropology in India named *Man in India* in 1921.<sup>1</sup> Roy's aim was to develop an Indian School of Anthropology. In an editorial of *Man in India* published in 1985, the then editor Surajit Chandra Sinha commented,

Sarat Chandra Roy's enterprise in *Man in India* was motivated by the national needs of his times and his personal pride in nationalism. As for lines of scientific enquiry he also wanted Indian scholars to seek suggestions from Western scholars and so was adopted a policy.... It also transpires that practically all the Western and Indian path-finders in the anthropology of India have contributed to this journal (Sinha 1985: iv-v).

Suffice it to say that Roy was not a blind nationalist. He was open to suggestions and contributions from western experts in the pages of *Man in India* and quite a good number of western anthropologists had contributed their original research findings on India to this pioneering journal. Sangeeta

Dasgupta's perceptive comment in this regard is useful:

Roy's long and varied career witnessed the rise of Victorian evolutionism, then diffusionism, and the eventual displacement of these by functionalism: at different points in time he applied all these concepts to the Indian context. At the same time, as a professed Hindu and nationalist Indian, particularly in the later phases of his career, Roy sought to methodologically establish an 'Indian view-point' for anthropology, believing that anthropology would help in the integration of national life (Dasgupta 2007:144).

Roy's nationalism, despite his professed Hindu background, was basically Indian. In this connection one may recall a 1933 article written by Panchanan Mitra who was Roy's contemporary and the first professor of anthropology in India. The article was published under the editorship of Roy in *Man in India* under the title 'Research Leads in Anthropology in India'. In this article Mitra justified not only the importance of India in cultural studies but also pointed out the relevance of Indian philosophical thinking in developing modern anthropological theory. I quote him,

It is a far cry yet from the India of the day when it would not merely echo the modern West but would try its own methods to interpret anew the laws of nature and the predominant culture pattern of India would lead it to its time-old probing of all the secrets of creation through the introspection and scientific investigation of microcosmic man (Mitra 1933:12).

One may find a similarity in the thoughts of P. Mitra and S. C. Roy in their hopes to synthesise Indian philosophy with western anthropology. What was 'introspection' for

Mitra was 'sympathetic immersion' for Roy and none of them invoked the idea of a 'Hindu anthropology' or seemed to believe that modern anthropological concepts were already present in the ancient Hindu period in India.

#### **Brief biographies of Nationalist anthropologists in India**

In this section I would provide a brief description of some of the outstanding scholars of the early Indian anthropology who, though working during the colonial period, tried to build up a nationalist tradition of anthropology. All of the following anthropologists were born in India in the 19th century and applied their knowledge in anthropology and sociology for the cause of the marginalised and exploited tribals and other underprivileged and deprived sections of the Indian population. Although these anthropologists were influenced by the theory and methodology of the western anthropologists, they used the western knowledge for the cause of the exploited tribals and marginalised communities of India and also towards the materialist exposition of Indian social reality (Guha 2016). I present below a list of seven nationalist anthropologists who neither blindly imitated the colonial masters nor were they besieged by a 'Hindu Anthropology'.

**Sarat Chandra Roy (1871–1942).** He is regarded as the father of Indian anthropology. He was a practicing lawyer at Ranchi and began to do research on the society and culture of the tribes of the region not out of ethnological curiosity, administrative need or evangelical mission like the Europeans, but driven by his humanitarian passion to deliver justice to the exploited tribals. He was deeply moved by the plight of the Munda, Oraon and other tribal groups, who were subjected to the

continued oppression by an apathetic colonial administration and by a general contempt towards them in courts of law, as 'upper-caste' Hindu lawyers had little knowledge of their customs, religions, traditional laws and languages. His keen sympathy for the oppressed tribals inspired him to study their culture and Roy always stood for their cause. His house at Ranchi had a set of rooms reserved for his tribal clients so that those who came from far-off villages could stay on while their cases were being fought in court (Ghosh 2008).

**Bhupendranath Datta** (1880–1961). Bhupendranath was the younger brother of the famous Hindu revivalist social reformer Swami Vivekananda. He joined the anti-British struggle and was sent to prison by the colonial government in India, and later earned an M.A. in sociology from Brown University, USA and a PhD in anthropology from the University of Hamburg in 1923. His books *Dialectics of Hindu Ritualism* (1950) and *Studies in Indian Social Polity* (1963), although published much later, can be regarded as pioneering works on Indian society and culture from a Marxist perspective (See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhupendranath\\_Datta](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhupendranath_Datta)). Datta presented his research paper on the political condition of colonial India to V. I. Lenin. Lenin gave a reply to Bhupendranath and requested him to collect data on the peasant organisations in India, which was very much appreciated by Datta (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/aug/26c.htm>). His contributions have not yet been included in the curriculum in Indian Anthropology nor do the critics of Indian anthropology mention Datta's name in their critiques on the subject (Guha 2019).

**B. R. Ambedkar** (1891–1956). Ambedkar's views on the origin of caste were also neglected in the anthropology and sociology curricula in the Indian universities

and colleges. Ambedkar is still a nobody in the syllabi of anthropology in India. As early as 1916, he made a novel attempt to explain the caste system in India in a paper read before the anthropology seminar of the American anthropologist Alexander Goldenweizer (1880–1940) at Columbia University. Ambedkar was then 25 years old and a doctoral student in anthropology. The full title of his paper was 'Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development'. Starting from a fundamental anthropological finding of tribal clan exogamy, Ambedkar had been able to show how caste endogamy was superimposed on it. Secondly, his exposition of caste as an extreme form of class system as early as 1916 was also exemplary and this work of Ambedkar was never mentioned or referred to by the world-renowned scholars on caste in India (Ambedkar 1916). Take for example G. S. Ghurye. In his famous book *Caste and Class in India* (1957) Ghurye mentioned the name of Ambedkar only once at page 226 and that too as 'the leader of the Scheduled Caste' although Ghurye discussed at length the importance of endogamy in characterising the caste society in India (Guha 2017).

**Panchanan Mitra** (1892–1936). He was the first professor of anthropology in India 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* published 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 1930 (Bose 2006:1439).

**Biraja Sankar Guha** (1894–1961). Guha was the founder of the Anthropological Survey of India and was known to the students of anthropology only as a physical anthropologist who made a classification of the Indian population on the basis of their physical features. Very few people know that he first undertook a thoroughgoing field survey on the social tensions among the refugees of the then East Pakistan for suggesting to the government how to understand their problems and improve their living conditions. (Guha: 1959)

**K. P. Chattopadhyay** (1897–1963). Chattopadhyay was not only the Head of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Calcutta but was also a life-long fighter for civil liberties movement in West Bengal before and after the independence of India. His researches on the jute mill workers and the workers of the then Calcutta Corporation were pioneering in anthropology which broke away from the colonial anthropological tradition (Roy-Burman 2000).

**Tarak Chandra Das** (1898–1964). Das made a marvellous empirical study, still unparalleled in global and Indian anthropology, on the devastations caused by the Bengal famine of 1943 during the colonial period. Das was such a courageous academic that he in his presidential address in the Anthropology section of the Indian Science Congress in 1941 criticised the colonial government and the Christian missionaries for doing a lot of harm to the tribals of north east India. He had a vision for the application of anthropology for human welfare but that was forgotten by the Indian anthropologists. The critics of Indian anthropology also did not care to look at the socially relevant and nationalist studies of T. C. Das (Guha 2011).

### Conclusion

The future of anthropology in India in the broader context of nation-building cannot be understood without looking into its past. The true nationalist tradition of anthropology in India, or, for that matter, in any country cannot be developed without looking into the works of the anthropologists that contributed towards the goal of nation-building. ■

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### NOTE

1 The first professional journal of anthropology in India was *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay* which was founded in 1886. Its first editor was Edward Tyrrell Leith, a British national and professor of Law at

the Government Law College, Bombay (now Mumbai). This journal continued up to 1973 (Shah 2014:363). Shah, A. M. 'Anthropology in Bombay', 1886-1936. *Sociological Bulletin*. 63 (3): 355-367.

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