

Ethnography of Development: Challenges and Promises

GEETIKA RANJAN

Abstract

Ethnography as a tool for social research plays a vital role in the development of a people. The present article argues for the indispensability of ethnographic research for arriving at the actual understanding of a people. It addresses the need to cast aside the obsession with post modernist view on ethnography if the goal is to undertake meaningful research.

Key Words: Ethnography, Development, Anthropology, Post Modernism, Fieldwork.

Introduction

Ethnographic writings entail a detailed description of a culture on the basis of fieldwork. It is a firsthand account of the way of life of a community. Cultures are many and vary from each other. Ethnography forms the medium of conveying the knowledge about a culture to others. Such a simplistic and harmless looking endeavour has come under tremendous onslaught by a group of scholars - the post modernists - who decry the characteristics of modernists' ethnography based on detachment, scientific neutrality and rationalism (Rabinow 1986). For them, "neither the experience nor the interpretive activity of the scientific researcher can be considered innocent" (Clifford 1983: 133) and since the collection of anthropological data is shrouded in subjectivity, it is not possible to analyze that objectively (Taylor 1979). Said (1978), Fabian (1983) and Inden (1986), and others have pointed out that the relationship between the observer and the observed as embodied in orientalist literature and in anthropology generally spilled hegemony and inequality between people.

Post modernist anthropologists insist that the study of 'other cultures' (Beattie 1968) by one who is an outsider comes with the baggage of one's

Geetika Ranjan is Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, North-Eastern Hill University.

own views, one's own cultural ethos and it is through these that he interprets the culture under study (not that they consider auto-ethnography to be the ultimate solution). Therefore the study of other cultures cannot be objective. There is bound to be bias in this search for meaning of the other culture and as such the claim of ethnographic writings about telling the truth is a fallacy. They make a clarion call for deconstruction and the need for a new understanding of representation in knowing the truth about a culture. Post Modernism urges anthropologists to give up cultural generalizations and the task of giving laws and switch to description, interpretation, and the search for meaning (Ferraro 2006).

From the above it becomes quite clear that the post modernist anthropologists have been making a conscious effort to cling on to the ghost of colonial ethnography and 19th century cultural evolutionist theorists' shortcomings to make their point of view much more conspicuous than it actually deserves. It cannot be denied that the earliest writings on the tribes in India by administrator ethnographers smack of ethnocentrism. Elwin mentions that John Butler uses derogatory terms to refer to the Assamese people, the Khamptis, the Singphos and the Abors and in similar vein J.F. Needham addresses the Mishmis (Elwin 1989: 187). Yet there are many handbooks and monographs written by the anthropologically oriented administrators which deserve attention. *Tribes and Castes of North – West Provinces of Agra and Oudh* by Crooke, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* by Thurston and Rangachari are some such works (Sarana 2005: 90). These works, with all their weaknesses and strengths, did at least herald the documentation of various tribes and caste groups in India.

Anthropological ways of doing fieldwork and writing ethnographies have travelled a long way since the days of colonial administrators. Right from the times of Franz Boas, the imperativeness of studying specific cultures empirically has been the cornerstone of the discipline. Further, while there is no denying the fact that it is necessary to dissect or deconstruct 'development', "if Anthropologists have to make politically meaningful contributions to the worlds in which they work they must continue to make the vital connection between knowledge and action" (Gardner and Lewis 1996:153).

Ethnography

Ethnography has two meanings – one refers to the process and the other to the product of the process. It is the ethnography of fieldwork that gives rise

to the text. It is not just a descriptive account of the way of life of a particular people because in anthropological studies description cannot be neatly separated from analysis and interpretation. Now the crisis of representation questions the traditional fieldwork methods and debates over the very nature of Anthropology itself. The post modernist stance that participant observer is flawed and there is no true objectivity in Anthropology seems to be a rather loud statement. The post modernists' vociferous call for the search for meaning is made out to sound novel, unprecedented and a road untraveled earlier, but this is not the case. Nevertheless the over emphasis on deconstruction and interpretation undoubtedly signals that "they may fail to see the forest for the trees" (McGee and Warms 1996:481).

While Marcus and Fischer write that the purpose of cultural critique is "to generate critical questions from one society to probe the other" (1986:117) and the aim is "to apply both the substantive results and the epistemological lessons learned from ethnography abroad to the renewal of the critical function of anthropology as it is pursued in ethnographic projects at home" (1986:112), it is urged that caution is exercised while doing so, so that the specificities and the diversities are not all agglomerated on a common plinth where they actually do not belong. The post modernist contention of a 'borderless world' (Appadurai 1991) seems too utopian an idea to find any semblance in actual reality. In fact Uberoi rightly remarks, "The aim and method of science are no doubt uniform throughout the world but the problem of science in relation to society is not" (1968:119).

Anthropology for Development

Post-modernism haunts social science today (Rosenau 1992: 3). It is a powerful fire that threatens to burn everything including itself (Ahmed 2009:46). In Anthropology itself, there are those who believe that postmodernism has taken the centre stage and that "the ingression of postmodernist thought and its tendency to undermine all efforts at legitimation of the scientific project" has precipitated a crisis in the discipline (Nencel and Pels 1991: 1-2). This has led to the widening of friction between academic anthropology and development anthropology. For academic anthropology, development anthropology is second-rate, both intellectually and morally (Gow 1993), and the latter views the former as irrelevant, both theoretically and politically (Little and Painter 1995). Amidst these arguments Scheper-Hughes minces no words when she writes, "If we cannot begin to think about social institutions and practices in moral or ethical terms, then anthropology strikes

me as quite weak and useless" (1995: 410). As the debate goes on, it becomes pertinent to reiterate the need to look into the time and the situations against the backdrop of which ethnographic writings have come up. Once we do that we are again reminded of the fact that ethnographies reflect specific cultures and specific time periods and so any generalization about such writings being mere fictions is nothing short of sheer injustice meted out to them and their writers.

When India became independent, the government plans focused on ensuring that the villages were equipped with basic requirements for quality living – education, infrastructure, health facilities etc. Thus Indian villages witnessed experiments such as the implementation of Community Development Programmes and Panchayati Raj. For proper implementation and fruition of such developmental programmes, leadership and particularly political leadership played a pivotal role. The planners and policy makers of the newly born independent India realized that development of the country depended upon the development of the villages.

It is at this stage when ethnographic writings by F.G. Bailey, D.N. Majumdar, L.P. Vidyarthi, S.C. Dube, David Pocock, and Oscar Lewis unveiled the relationship between leadership, power and democracy, bringing out the subtleties and nuances of latent tensions lying beneath the day to day workings of the village life.

S.C Dube's highly acclaimed work, *India's Changing Villages* (1958), on the performance of the Community Development Programmes, required an intense fieldwork oriented approach to assess the actual working of the government-initiated programmes. Mandelbaum points out that a section of this book is devoted to the contribution a social scientist can make to the action programmes and writes that "Dube was conscious of the fact that while doing ethnography his role should be that of an analyst rather than a therapist and that he needs to be cautious of not to give in to the urgency for too quick results and wholesale advice" (Mandelbaum 1959:700). The fine line segregating the analyst in the ethnographer from the therapist in him is in reality a rather blurred one and the erstwhile ethnographers held the control button to ensure that they do not trespass into the area of the therapists.

However, if one goes through some ethnographic writings of 1950s, including Dube's, one finds it difficult to draw a clear line between description and analysis. Some years later Dube is more candid in his views in his keynote address to the Tenth World Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological

Sciences (1978) where he “castigates Third World anthropologists for not playing a more decisive role of enriching the discipline with the articulation of grass-roots consciousness” (quoted in Padia 2008:62).

One finds D.N. Majumdar’s *Himalayan Polyandry* (1962) falling in the same category. In this monograph Majumdar as a fieldworker describes the polyandrous people, the Khasa, and analyses the impact of the Community Development Projects introduced in their area. Khasa along with others such as Lohar, Badai, Bajgi and Koltas together are known as Jaunsari tribe – the people of Jaunsar Bawar. Majumdar’s work pointed out that the Khasa (Rajput and Brahmins) formed the highest rung of the society and the Koltas were looked down upon as untouchables. The Khasa are elites, landowners who use Koltas as bonded labourers, whose plight has been brought out by Nadeem Hasnain in his book *Bonded Forever* (1982).

In his various works (1937, 1947, 1950), Majumdar highlighted that development of a people is quite an uphill task. There is a gnawing gap between the documentation of the ideals underpinning development and their replication into reality, as contact of weaker people with caste Hindus has drained them economically and psychologically. Majumdar urged for initiation of planned cultural contacts with the tribals through the assistance of anthropologists. According to Madan “anthropology could offer useful knowledge and usable advice to the policy maker, the administrator and the social worker... The changed situation in the early 1950s offered new challenges and he (Majumdar) responded to them swiftly and energetically’ (Madan 1994:29). For him, cultural relativism stretched to extremes by some American anthropologists had no meaning. He openly explained cultures as ‘dominant’ and ‘decadent’ (1994:219) in order to emphasize on the urgency required in attending to the obstacles that were there in the process of development. It is pertinent for the outsider to explain the feel of the insider without mincing words in order to really sensitize the planners and implementers about how exactly they need to proceed in improving the quality of life of a people. The relevance of their works can be garnered from the fact that as ethnographers they attempted to understand the picture of developmental programmes when they were implemented.

In this era of awakening of sorts, Vidyarthi comes hard on Indian anthropologists. According to him, the non-Indians have continued to influence Indian anthropologists to such an extent that anthropology in India has overlooked what may be termed as ‘Indianness’ and this is because Anthropology in India has not progressed under the spell of unthinking imitation

(Vidyarthi 1977:76). Majumdar had long back given a wakeup call to the fraternity of anthropologists in India to “separate the native warp from the foreign woof” (1939:1-2). In similar vein, Uberoi also makes a plea that we “concentrate on decolonization, learn to nationalize our problems and take our poverty seriously” (1968:123). Asad also points out that the roots of Anthropology lay “in an unequal power encounter between the West and the Third World” and this has helped “in maintaining the structure of power represented by the colonial system” (1973:16f). How strongly the need for mental decolonization was addressed could be garnered from the fact that in 1976 social scientists from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe came together under the canopy of UNESCO and together raised the necessity of ending the dependency of social sciences in the developing countries on the West. They reiterated that “there has long existed an imbalance between intellectual ‘imports’ and ‘exports’ between the Third World countries and the advanced nations of the West. There has been an abundant flow into the developing countries of ready-made conceptual models, theoretical frameworks, research techniques, etc., whereas the flow in the reverse direction has been the raw data, whether collected by foreigners or native scholars” (Madan 1977:9). Vidyarthi, as an ethnographer, was more daring in his approach than his contemporaries and did not believe in entertaining the dilemma of oscillating between the roles of the analyst and the therapist. He was emphatic in driving home the relevance of action oriented research as the cornerstone of anthropology of that time. He encouraged Indian anthropologists to provide solutions to the problems of industrialization, urbanization and tribal development in their fieldwork based research. Considering leadership to be crucial for the development of rural and tribal areas, Vidyarthi wrote extensively on the theoretical and empirical sides of the issue (1967, 1976) and also took into account the then growing trend of student unrest spearheaded by student leaders in Chotanagpur (1976).

Thus the decade of the fifties and the sixties was a very significant period in India’s history of development. Various ethnographers covered the underlying tensions and factional politics in the village (Pocock 1957, Seigel and Beals 1960). The intimate nexus between caste, power and politics and how this lethal combination called the shots at the village level was the focus of some other ethnographers (Dube 1969, Beteille 1969).

Many anthropologists have contributed to the study and understanding of rural and tribal problems. Their ethnographic works focus on the plight of the tribals who are standing at cross roads, being often displaced by the

ambitious development projects. Their writings were the result of in-depth fieldworks. Scholars like L. P. Vidyarthi, Sachidanand, Dharani Sinha, B.K. Roy Burman, B.N. Sahay, and L.K. Mahapatra decried the bureaucratic approach and the 'imputed needs' theory of planners and administrations. They also highlighted the 'felt needs' of the tribals, their locus in forests and hills and their unique cultural heritage which the tribes were not ready to compromise with.

These ethnographic works also draw attention to the fact that anthropologists should enter into the policy area and conduct policy studies and do what Richard Fox says about "Anthropology of the present" (1991). There are anthropologists who still adhere to the anthropology of the past that was built on the plinth of positivism and value-neutrality. For Laura Thompson (1976) the anthropologist should not adopt the 'part of an administrator, developer, manipulator, "do gooder"'. There are others who consider such views to be dated. For instance, Dell Hymes (1974) and Elizabeth Colson (1985) consider the direct involvement of anthropologists in administration as the need of the hour. The anthropologist 'undertakes policy analysis and informs the people of decisions and their consequences and provide them with tools of effective political participation' (Davis and Mathews 1980).

The fetish for objectivity in anthropological research was never to be equated with a mechanical understanding of a people *sans* empathy. Fieldwork is a matter of years when both the subject (the researcher) and the object (the informant) influence each other. However, an anthropologist needs to continuously and consciously remember that he is doing research. He may be an intruder for them. That is why writing ethnography seizes to be a concern of mind alone, but of heart or soul as well (Sahay 2010). To empathize with people, one need not be in similar shoes. I do not agree with Rosaldo (1984) when he writes that he could only truly understand the rage in Ilongots' grief getting manifested in head hunting when he lost his wife. It would not be a utopian thought to believe that an ethnographer can very well relate to the abject realities of life like poverty, ignorance and exploitation.

An Ethnographer at Work

The road for an ethnographer attempting to understand the workings of leadership, administration, developmental plans etc is not an easy one to tread. Being in the field amidst diverse interests vying for power, parity, position and peace the ethnographer usually finds oneself in a no man's land.

I did fieldwork among the Bhoksa tribals from 1997 to 2005. Bhoksa comes under the category of a Primitive Tribal Group (a constitutional term being opposed by many). They inhabit the Terai region of Uttaranchal – a region earlier feared as the land of malaria, marshes and tigers and later envied for being the rice bowl of the state. They cleared this area in the remote past and have lived there ever since. At the time of Partition the State government initiated the process of inviting refugees from Pakistan such as the Rai Sikhs to settle in Terai. Their aim was to generate revenue for the State by making the most out of the fertile soil. As a result the Rai Sikhs usurped Bhoksa land in large measure in no time. The State government went a step further and regularized this usurpation. By 1969 the Land Regulation Act was implemented but most of the land had already exchanged hands. The problem of land alienation reduced the Bhoksas to a state of abject poverty. When I started my study the Panchayati Raj was implemented. This had given rise to the dual nature of political leadership at the level of the village. Among the Bhoksas, there was the traditional village headman whose office continues to exist as a matter of tradition and there was the elected headman as per the provisions of the Panchayati Raj.

My study revolves around the role of leadership in bringing about the change and how far the institutions like Panchayati Raj have actually empowered the Bhoksas. I realized that Bhoksas despite being a numerically dominant group continues to be a marginalized group.

As a woman ethnographer studying politics of a vulnerable group living side by side with the Rai Sikhs representing money and muscle power, I was a subject of constant scrutiny by the subjects themselves. Here I report one such instance. One day I went to meet a woman village head – the Gaon Pradhan in a Bhoksa village with prior appointment. She had left for the field as informed by her husband and brother-in-law. As I waited for her, what followed was myself being interviewed and my credentials under investigation. The brother-in-law was an under graduate and had not heard of Anthropology, a discipline still struggling to find a place in many universities and colleges in India. I had to fall back on Sociology to sound credulous. Further I was also asked to come with some books the next day. I was often seen with suspicion by the political elites in the area and had to exercise great caution in the field and repeatedly tried to send out the signal of being just a neutral learner.

The challenges of doing fieldwork especially one focusing on the politics of power that goes hand in hand with the legislation and execution of

development initiatives are manifold. Thus doing ethnography is sometimes like walking a tight rope. An ethnographer observes the subjects, but he is also constantly observed by them. As an outsider, a city person undertaking the study of politics and development of a rural community, I was facilitated by the headman and the members of the Gram Panchayat. It did not take too long for the message to spread that I was a *guest* of the headman, as a result of which I was shown a lot of respect by the villagers and spoken to in a rather politically correct manner. However after the initial formal encounters the villagers became more relaxed and comfortable in my presence. It is actually a continuous struggle for an ethnographer to maintain a fine balance between empathy and aloofness, between the heart and the mind, in order to objectively understand the 'true' picture. Furer-Haimendorf opines, "Any realistic and unbiased analysis of the present situation of the Indian tribes must inevitably contain some references to the failures as well as the successes of government policies and include also some criticism of those responsible for the misfortunes of many communities. Such outspoken criticism may be considered inappropriate on the part of an observer who throughout his fieldwork has benefitted from the assistance of numerous government officials. Yet no good purpose can be served by turning a blind eye to corrupt practices and the resulting failures of policies, thereby distorting the picture of the true conditions of tribal populations" (1982:xii).

Conclusion

Deliberations on post modernism continue to be an important academic activity. Undoubtedly post modernist thought has raised some pertinent epistemological issues. However it appears that post modernists have exaggerated the past mistakes of ethnographers. Rather than falling into the snare of theoretical moorings the need of the hour is to become, what Scheper-Hughes calls 'barefoot anthropologists', who would not be trapped in false idealism of seeing no evil, hearing no evil and speaking no evil, but rather be "the producers of politically complicated and morally demanding texts and images capable of sinking through the layers of acceptance, complicity, and bad faith that allow the suffering and the deaths to continue without even the pained cry of recognition of Conrad's evil protagonist, Kurtz: 'The horror! the horror!'" (2006:507-508). The need of the hour is "not a retreat from ethnography but rather an ethnography that is personally engaged and politically committed" (Scheper-Hughes 2006:511). Writing a dialogical ethnography (Tedlock and Mannheim 1995) to justify the inclusion of voices

from all quarters of a people and for simplifying the interpretation of meaning seems to be a rather naïve solution to the 'weaknesses' of modernist ethnographic writings. If ethnographic texts are fictions for the post modernists, dialogical ethnography looks fictitious. What is required is a moderate post modernist position to let Anthropology contribute to addressing issues related to problems and development. I accept that ethnographies dealing with various dimensions of development and empowerment may be interpreted differently by different readers in different times. However the interpretations would vary only in terms of degree. Finally we may remember what Madan writes: "Anthropological representations, their claims to holism notwithstanding, express particular visions of reality. Far from being their weakness, this is, I think, their strength. An absolute truth value may not be claimed for any one of them. This does not mean that they are all equally useful: the criteria of correspondence, coherence, and parsimony should apply. Any claims to the contrary will only land us in a Kafkaesque situation of the kind where people lose faith in the notion of time because different clocks in the house show the hour variously" (Madan 1994: 106).

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