

Anthropological Ambivalences: Are there Ways Forward ?

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INTRODUCTION

Anthropology as a discipline has no clear identity for reasons that are not very clear. The question of its identity reminds one of the story of seven blind men and an elephant of whom they touch different parts and form different perceptions of the same. When strangers come to know that I am an anthropologist they say, "Interesting subject. So you dig earth to find out ancient tools and bones, don't you?", or "So you take measurements of head, nose and eyes, right?", or "So, you study festivals and rituals of primitive people, very interesting!"

This clearly indicates that popular perceptions of our subject matter or what we do are, if anything, highly unclear, but do we professional anthropologists have something definitive to tell them? My answer is : "not really". Anthropologists deal with all kinds of societies, but are perceived to be associated with the so-called simple, tribal, rural, and primitive societies. Such association is not really wrong because we indeed have a lot more to deal with such societies than with the so-called complex, urban, industrial or post-industrial societies. Some of us have developed extensive vocabulary and precise methodology for analyzing artifacts and fossils that are thousands of years old. They have exact knowledge of the use and age of those objects

used by our ancient ancestors. Others among us extract blood for grouping or assessing haemoglobin level or take palmer and finger prints to study the whorls, loops, and arches that throw valuable information about human evolution or simply take measurements of human body or its nutritional level. There are then those who live with the people, learn their language, and study their religion, customs, beliefs, values and norms, kinship and technology, and so on.

Is there something common in all that we do? The answer is both yes and no. Yes, because they all deal with human beings, dead or alive. And no, because the concepts, methods, tools and techniques, style of processing and presentation of data, and the way data are analyzed, generalizations are drawn, etc. are rather different in the three branches of anthropology – Prehistoric Archaeology, Physical Anthropology and Social-Cultural Anthropology. This has given rise to different textbooks, different journals, different faculty and different scientific research positions, and so on. The distinction between Physical Anthropology and Social-Cultural Anthropology is most clearly noticeable in a university department. The branch called Linguistic Anthropology has more or less vanished from anthropology departments in India and the next to follow seems to be Prehistoric Archaeology, although the presence of this sub-discipline in our syllabi for National Eligibility Test, Union Public Service Commission, and various state service examinations is disproportionate to its presence in anthropology departments of the country. I think there is a serious need to look into this for better health of the discipline future.

I see Anthropology in India as a discipline marred by many ambivalences. Some of the major ambivalences today are as follows:

1. Simple or Complex Societies

2. Integration or Specialization
3. Culture or Civilization
4. Identity or Adaptation
5. Academic or Policy Anthropology
6. Participant Observation or Participatory Rural Appraisal
7. Self-culture or Other Culture

I shall now briefly discuss these ambivalences that have been overwhelming the anthropologists of the country.

SIMPLE OR COMPLEX SOCIETIES

The classification of societies into simple and complex, rural and urban, pre-industrial and industrial, etc. seems have been taken for granted by social scientists for there is hardly any debate on what makes a society simple and another complex. Although classification is inevitable in any modernist project, is the practice of classifying societies, the way we do, really scientific? Do we not give primacy to certain attributes and ignore others while indulging in such a practice? Are the characteristics of one type not found in the other type of societies? Take, for example, the distinction between simple and complex societies. If simple societies have simple technology do complex societies have complex technologies? Do complex societies have no simple technologies and vice versa? In what sense does a technology become simple and another as complex? Or does it mean that the mechanisms of social control and norms of social behavior are more complex in complex societies? If yes, how does one label one mechanism of social control as simple and another complex? Does greater monetization of economy make the latter more complex? If yes, where is the dividing line between the two? In what senses are the so-called simple societies 'simple'?

Assuming for the moment that there are simple societies,

do they gradually turn into complex ones resulting in disappearance of simple societies one day or are the two societies 'ideal types' that always remain relatively so because if simple societies become complex the complex societies should automatically become more complex? If this is not accepted then we must accept the premise that only the former type of society changes whereas the latter remains stagnant, which is not correct. So, if simple societies are going to be transformed into the category of complex societies or disappear altogether then one day there be no category of societies called 'simple'. Do anthropologists lose their relevance then?

It is safe to assume that simple societies are not going to remain simple forever, at least in absolute terms. Why can't anthropologists study them when they are no longer simple? Do they foresee losing their jobs or relevance when such societies become complex societies in absolute terms?

Before closing this section, a reference may be made to a valuable book by Jonathan Rigg (1997), which finds it difficult to segregate simple and complex societies particularly in South Asian context, where any understanding of rural change, for instance, cannot be complete without referring to linkages of rural societies with the urban and industrial societies. In this book, he amply demonstrates how the rural and the urban are closely intertwined, making the classification between the two societies rather facile. One implication of Rigg's contribution is that it blurs the boundaries between simple and complex societies, and thereby the line between anthropology and sociology as well, for, indeed anthropologists cannot understand the rural societies without referring to the urban and sociologists cannot study urban/industrial societies without referring to the rural. The former is not only intimately connected with the latter but has actually evolved out of the former.

INTEGRATION OR SPECIALIZATION

There is a general feeling among many senior anthropologists that we have super-specialised ourselves at the cost of our discipline (Srivastava 1999, Eriksen 2006). One may make here a counter-argument, claiming that this super-specialisation has in fact helped anthropologists deal with several issues engaging the contemporary, complex societies. Super-specialisations do equip anthropologists with tools and techniques that are not available within their discipline to deal with new issues and problems. They help anthropologists to collaborate with scholars working in specialized fields and learn from each other, work out new techniques of handling their problems, and sometimes make ground-breaking contributions to knowledge. Therefore, this can be an enriching experience for the discipline, rather than hurting the discipline, as it is perceived by many.

It is further religiously believed in India that only an integrated discipline of anthropology can truly throw light on the holistic understanding of 'man'. Although 'holism' has been one of the hallmarks of anthropology since its very beginning, it is perhaps time we debate whether it has served any purpose of the discipline so far. Is holism an ideal for anthropologists to achieve? Can holism and specialization go together? If not, which do we choose for the future of anthropology?

It is also frequently argued that anthropology departments without physical stream are considered to be incomplete and no different from sociology departments. One may argue here that there is no reason for us to feel insecure before sociologists because we depend on fieldwork for production of our knowledge, which the sociologists generally do not, or at least are not supposed to. Similarly a Prehistoric Archaeologist or Linguistic Anthropologist may someday refuse to accept the degree as a degree in

anthropology, without these sub-disciplines being taught at anthropology departments. Thus there is a need to redefine 'holism' in anthropology.

The continuation of this four-fold division of anthropology is itself a subject of debate in the US today. While some universities are going for a break-up, others prefer continuing with the old model. In European universities the discipline has rarely existed in the integrated sense as it is understood in India.

Specialisations are essential because they are linked with faculty positions, scientific posts in the Anthropological Survey of India, distribution of courses for teaching, and so on. The difficult question that remains is how does one know that one has specialized beyond what one should have? What degree of specialization is good for the discipline? In other words, what are the symptoms of super-specialisation? Can we identify them? Should we identify them at all ?

The integration or specialization ambivalence is often aggravated in India by treating anthropology as a science or arts discipline, which is a remnant of an old debate in the discipline. When it is treated as the former and brought under the faculty or school of science, it receives better funding but the casualty is social-cultural anthropology, which does not get enough air to breathe and when it is treated as the latter and brought under the faculty/school of humanities or social sciences, physical anthropology suffers. What does one do in either of the two scenarios?

CULTURE OR CIVILIZATION

What should be the unit of anthropological study – culture or civilization – has also been debated in India. Michael Ames of the University of British Columbia claims (1976) that anthropologists like Dumont, Beteille, Vidyarthi, Mandelbaum and Singer (one may add here the names of

Surajit Sinha and N. K. Bose) benefitted greatly by making civilization rather than culture the unit of their study. Should we hence follow their footsteps? Is fieldwork adequate for the study of civilization? The answer here is not a very clear yes.

While the relationship between culture and civilization is quite clear, it is argued that we cannot have an empirical study of civilization because it refers to the threads that connect cultures. It is like the grammar of cultures, which can only be inferred by observing the behaviour of cultures. In other words, culture is seen as the domain of empiricism and civilization that of interpretation or inference. But is empirical approach enough to unravel all facets of culture? Do we study culture directly or through its traits and elements? Are some aspects of civilization not amenable to empirical treatment as well? Are the differences between the two that of degree or that of kind?

Whereas it may not be possible to discard either culture or civilization from the vocabulary of our discipline in the near future, it might be useful to debate if these concepts have or have not helped in the perpetuation of certain dominant patriarchal values and beliefs in our societies and have thereby proved themselves to be the instruments of the men, the dominant, the powerful, and even the unruly at times, as recently noticed in the pub incident in Mangalore city. Is it possible to free these concepts from such values? If not, should we continue to talk about them?

IDENTITY OR ADAPTATION

In this section, I shall illustrate how serious the issue of identity is to Indian anthropologists. One of our discipline's identities is that it is born of colonial rule, the most important reason why many Indian stalwarts like Srinivas, Madan, Beteille, Dube and Veena Das identify themselves as

anthropologists in the US and Europe and as sociologists back home. Srinivas has an answer to why they do so. He wrote: "... (till 1950s) anthropology was under a cloud because nationalist Indians regarded the subject as an instrument of colonial rulers who wanted to keep the tribals distinct from the mainstream population" (1997: 2). Unfortunately, this cloud on the sky of anthropology in India exists even after more than 50 years of India's independence. It is possible that the great similarity between "People of India" by Herbert Risley and "People of India" by Kumar Suresh Singh – both showing communities as isolates and ignoring their inter-linkages – has been partially responsible for continuation of this identity of anthropology, although ironically neither Risley nor Singh was an anthropologist.

But have we ever cared to defend ourselves in this regard? Not that I am aware of, but our position is not indefensible. First of all, it is long evident that the association between anthropology and colonialism is blown out of proportion even globally (Asad 1973). Secondly, the colonial administrators like Hutton and Mills, who were given recognition as anthropologists by some of the best universities in the world, were not trained in the discipline. Third, no one talks about activities of anthropologists like Verrier Elwin, who severed his relationship with his church, fought against colonialism, and participated in the freedom movement of India, much to the chagrin of his country people.

ACADEMIC OR POLICY ANTHROPOLOGY

During the past few decades there is tremendous pressure on anthropologists to take up policy research and mould themselves according to the market demands. Some senior anthropologists themselves rue the fact that anthropologists are no longer consulted by the governments even on tribal

issues. Those who argue in favour of academic anthropology are seen as those living in "ivory tower" or even "fools' paradise". Hence, policy research is seen as one important path to survival and even prestige of the discipline. Nancy Geilhufe (1979) of the University of California shows how pioneers in anthropology like Cyril Belshaw and Ward Goodenough saw a role for anthropologists in policy analysis and how the participant observation method provided good input for policy making. But she shows the difficulties that lie in the path of a policy anthropologist. She shows how the priorities of policy anthropology are often far removed from that of academic anthropology. She finds a supporter in Vinay Srivastava, who in an article published in 1999, argues in favour of academic anthropology and decries policy or market anthropology.

The expression 'policy anthropology' is actually not so frequently used in India; the more common expressions are 'Action Anthropology', 'Urgent Anthropology' and 'Applied Anthropology'. While such research is considered socially relevant, there is a tacit feeling among some anthropologists in India that such research is meant for the mediocre among them who are unable to synthesize knowledge at a higher, theoretical level. But if policy anthropologists are academically unsound, they in the long prove themselves to be subjects of jeer and ridicule in the corridors of power.

Policy research, it may be further noted, is often based on quick surveys of target populations or areas and not on participant observation type of research that needs at least one year or so to collect data and another year to write the report. Eriksen rightly says: "The media sphere's demand for speed cannot be met by fieldwork-based anthropology, it necessarily takes longer to analyse and present the data than a newspaper or commercial publisher can accept" (2006: 111). Hence, Rapid Rural Appraisals, Participatory Rural

Appraisals, Focussed Group Discussions, etc are the common tools of policy research but these new tools are of no value without sound ethnography and are rarely taught to anthropology students in India, nor are any senior anthropologists trained to handle these tools well.

Anthropologists working with international development agencies or government departments have often experienced that they are in a way persuaded to make the kind of policy recommendations that their funding agencies want and not what they would independently like to recommend. Those who survive in this trade know what compromises they have to make with their funding agencies on matters of policy recommendations. Those who sponsor policy research are least concerned with what is in the best interests of the people and are driven purely by their own policies and priorities. But this is no reason why some other anthropologists should not do policy anthropology, and why every policy anthropologist should have similar experience. As a matter of fact, in a recent book titled *Cultivating Development* (2005), which is considered by some to be a ground-breaking work, the author gives a positive account of policy research on a DFID-funded project among the Bhils in western India, David Mosse, the author of this book, forces us to rethink on the relationship between policy and practice.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION OR PARTICIPATORY RURAL APPRAISAL

The new generation of people like fast foods no matter how harmful those foods might be for their health. They want everything in life quickly – money, raise in salary, promotion, cars, etc. They have no time to wait and no inclination for going slow even on matters that should not be rushed. No wonder the new generation of anthropologists want tools and techniques that help them to collect data quickly, process them fast with the help of computers, and

utilize the extra time available for other, perhaps non-research, activities. Even professional anthropologists sometimes ask: "Who wants to stay in the field for one year and, for god's sake, why one should do it? Gone are the days of Malinowski. This is twenty-first century. We got to change our discipline, our methods of collecting data and everything we have been taught to do." They need facilities for charging their mobile phones even in fieldwork sites. They want Public Call Office and Internet access. They cannot wash their hair without shampoos and cannot have a bath the way the natives do.

Participant observation as the anthropological method seems to have become obsolete or at least unacceptable to this new breed of anthropologists. No matter how poorly trained to use the new tools of data collection like the Participatory Rural Appraisal, Rapid Rural Appraisal, and Focussed Group Discussions and how poorly they understand the relevance of such tools, they want to use them. They have no time to learn the language of the natives, which a participant observer requires. Instead, they go to their own home villages where they need not learn the language, manners and customs, where they are not suspected to be income tax officers or some government agents, and where they get easy access to people's houses and lives. Can they still be assumed to be learning and doing anthropology? Is what they are doing anthropology? If yes, in what sense?

One might like to argue why anthropology must cling on to participant observation. Why can't the discipline adapt to the changing world and change its methods, techniques and tools? Well, if the discipline was not adapting to the changing world it would not be surviving thus far and it is absolutely desirable that it adapts itself to face the contemporary challenges in society and culture. But the

questions that arise here are: Is our discipline adapting fast enough? Is there a built-in resilience to change? Should it change along a particular direction?

I am not arguing for participant observation at the cost of anthropology, for that is not possible. If one goes the other goes too. So if anthropology has to grow and adapt the participant observation method needs adaptation, too. But adaptation does not mean dilution, although rarely has any anthropologist met the standard set by Malinowski. Even W.H.R. Rivers' fieldwork among the Todas in the Nilgiri Hills fell far short of the Malinowskian standard regarding length of fieldwork. But would Rivers' fieldwork not be considered as based on participant observation? Where does George Marcus's "multi-sited ethnography" (1995) fit in here? To me the real question about participant observation is not "how long", because duration of fieldwork is always associated with a particular space, but "how sincere", "how serious", "how active", and so on.

SELF-CULTURE OR OTHER CULTURE

This is one of the most serious issues today. Srinivas was one of the tallest figures in India to recommend self-culture studies and his justification was that a culture needed to be studied both from within and from without. At the time he advocated self-culture studies in anthropology, such studies were unheard of and he considered himself a "maverick" for studying his own culture in Rampura, Mysore District, Karnataka. He wrote: "As an anthropologist, I am somewhat of a maverick in that I study my own culture and not any distant Other" (1997:1). I think one of the most important contributions to this debate has been made by Judith Okely, a professor of anthropology at the University of Edinburgh. In her book titled *Own or Other Culture* (1996) she questions the association of culture with bounded locations and

anthropology's privileging of Other cultures. She also draws our attention to Other cultures within one's own culture. In Indian context, they could mean studies on migrants, refugees, women, Scheduled Castes and Tribes, "untouchables", eunuchs and so on. In this sense, the boundary between self-culture and Other culture becomes blurred.

The justification given by some Indian anthropology students who wish to study their own cultures is, however, different. They claim that there are many misrepresentations of their cultures in earlier monographs written by colonial administrator-anthropologists and some of the accounts are not only "wrong" but even "insulting". Therefore, they set out themselves to present the "correct" version of their culture and expose the "wrong" representations of their cultures in the past. They willy nilly take upon themselves the White men's burden of cleansing the tarnished picture of their history and culture.

Before I take up the issue of correct and incorrect representations in various monographs I must dwell briefly on whether or not the native anthropologists succeeded in achieving their mission. The answer, to my mind, is negative. The quality of monographs prepared by the colonial administrator-anthropologists was too high for the native anthropologists to even reach close to it. The language, details of culture, and quality of publication were all far superior to the ones produced by the native scholars whose language is often incorrect, whose claims are often poorly substantiated with facts, who pay scanty attention to ethnographic details and whose quality of publication is one of the poorest. Many of them have actually ended up quoting profusely from earlier monographs rather than "correcting" them, which actually was their mission. I do not know of a single native anthropologist who could achieve what Anthony Walker

(1986) could do, without being a native himself, with regard to re-setting certain perceptions about the Todas presented by Rivers in his monograph, *The Todas* (1906).

Coming to the allegedly "wrong" representations of cultures in earlier monographs, I have never understood as to how this could be proved or disproved. Besides, those who wrote the monographs are no longer alive to defend themselves. A PhD student from the native community talks to one dozen old persons and claims that his culture never had polygamy, animal sacrifice, pre-marital sexual freedom, monkey-god worship, etc. as described in an earlier monograph written by a colonial administrator-anthropologist. He does not remind his readers that the earlier author had collected his information more than one hundred years ago when such practices might have been in existence. After all such practices do not always take very long to vanish. The more important question is how one ascertains that such practices did or did not exist one hundred years ago if there are no archaeological or linguistic evidences to prove either way? Can the memory of old people be trusted on matters that existed before they were born? Why should the present generation natives consider it "wrong" or "insulting" if their forefathers practised polygamy or animal sacrifice? Would that not mean imposing the contemporary values of a community on its ancestors? I would, therefore, argue that earlier monographs should be properly contextualized and perhaps read for the beauty of their accounts and whatever little insight they may provide about our past. Correcting the facts described therein ought not to be the mission of the present-day anthropologists, although there is no reason why such efforts should not be made, if evidences contrary to the facts stated in earlier monographs are clearly available and if some of the facts mentioned in earlier monographs continue to create

negative images of the people concerned or they continue to be discriminated against due to stereotypes created by earlier monographs. In such cases what is necessary to establish is the fact that the contemporary society is no longer what it was once described to be.

What other justification could there be for going to one's own village for one's doctoral research? Yes, if that village happens to be the only village where a particular institution, ritual, or practice that needs to be researched exists. Very often the justification given is that no research has been done on this or that community and no published literature exists on the same. Such a community is quite rare in India today. What the researcher actually means is that no published literature exists in English, which is not necessary. It is perhaps this mentality of our young researchers that they sadly ignore, the existence of the availability of often rich vernacular literature on their communities, which hold low status, because they are not given due space even by those who ought to have done so.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

By way of conclusion I shall draw the attention of fellow anthropologists to what T. H. Eriksen says in his book titled *Engaging Anthropology* (2006). I agree with him when he says that we have failed to take up our place in public debates. For instance he writes: "There are more of us than ever before, yet fewer reach out to communicate with a wider world" (p. 21). To quote him again: "The fact may be that when anthropologists fail to reach the general intellectual public, it is because they have been taught to be worried about the reactions from the people they eat lunch with than what people outside the university might think. As a result, they sometimes seem to write badly on purpose" (p. 104). One may differ with him on the cause of this state of anthropology but one finds little to disagree on the state of anthropology

itself. Eriksen reminds how our founding fathers like Tylor, Morgan and Frazer were widely respected outside the discipline because they were involved in public debates.

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