

Book Review

Nabakumar Duary. Biraja Shankar Guha: *Centenary Year of Teaching of Anthropology in India*. New Delhi: Aayu Publications (2023). ISBN: 978-93-91685-1. Pages 207. Price Hardbound 3200 INR.

The book under review is a unique book befitting the Centenary Year of Teaching in Anthropology. It is about a very versatile, dynamic, distinguished and elegant anthropologist who had singlehandedly created and nourished institutions and transformed anthropology into a very vibrant subject in India. Biraja Shankar Guha (BSG) was somebody who not only mattered to the fraternity of Anthropologist but also a policy maker and influencer to the Government of India. Dr. Duary, who has produced this wonderful illustrative book, has really done a commendable work in arranging the material which was scattered at many places. The book is the outcome of complete passion and perseverance, a rare example of dedication to bring together bits and pieces from different places in order to fit them into a Jigsaw Puzzle. I would call Dr. Duary an investigative anthropologist who has created an unprecedented treatise in the form of this pictorial almanac.

BSG was a very special kind of an anthropologist. Duary has decided to work on him because he was the Founder Director of the Anthropological Survey of India where Duary works. Besides this, he was also instrumental in starting of the Department of Anthropology, Delhi University and the First Director of the Bihar Tribal Research Institute. The book is divided into eleven chapters, all chapters are self-revealing snapshots depicting various facets of his life. In the beginning of the book, a very elegant portrait of BSG is given with him sitting in a couch, formally attired wearing a white colored suit and a checked necktie while reading a book. This shows a man intensely thinking while deeply engrossed in the contents of the book. The photograph is very professional in nature with very well-placed lighting scheme. What is also worth noticing is the fact that he was perhaps suffering with leukoderma?

The first chapter titled 'Birth and Family Background' introduces us to his family and ancestors. Dr. Duary must be complemented in collecting such rare pictures of his early life and family members. A photograph showing BSG with his siblings gives us glimpses of the attire of the rich children at the turn of the 19th century. A typical dress, it appears, was a white-coloured dhoti and a black-coloured coat. We also learn about his ancestors who were signatories of the Indo-Burma treaty. His brother was a barrister. Girija Shankar Guha was an administrator, politician as well as the Dewan of the Kingdom of Tripura. One can easily posit that the Guha family must have known the legendary Sachin Deb Burman who was related to the royal family of Tripura. An interesting fact that one learns about this family was that in his father's generation, the male children were not surviving after birth. When this was learnt by a nearby Muslim Faqir, he advised them to offer the hair of the newborn to a mosque. The family dutifully offered the hair of his father Abhay Shankar to a mosque, and believed that he survived because of this action.

Then onward, it became a custom of his family to offer hair to a mosque for the safety of the male children. This incidence is a very good example of the pluralistic fabric of India where there are undercurrents of fusion between different religions and sects.

In the chapter 'Education and Anthropological Training', there are a total of 41 illustrations with 33 photographs. His journey from Cotton Collegiate School to Harvard University is brilliantly depicted through photographs and illustrations. Precious documents like his application form, cover page of his doctoral thesis, doctoral certificate signed by the examiners like Hooton and Dixon have been reproduced in the chapter. What is important is the mention of the influence of philosopher and scholar Brajendranath Seal on BSG. Seal was the keynote speaker of the First Session of the First Universal Race Congress held at the University of London in 1911 and he presented his address on 'Race Origin' which was later published as 'Race, Tribe and Nation'. It was Seal who not only encouraged young BSG but also motivated him to do fieldwork among the Khasis. It must have been the long-lasting influence of Seal on this young mind that he decided to work on the problem of race. This motivation perhaps took BSG to Harvard where he worked under the world-famous race scientist of that time R. B. Dixon, the author of "The Racial History of Man". By working for his doctorate at Harvard University, BSG became the academic heir in the genealogical sequence of Louis Agassiz – F. W. Putman – R. B. Dixon – BSG.

In the chapter 'Family Life' consisting of 28 illustrations with 12 photographs, the family life of BSG is presented. Of special importance in this chapter is the passion of writing letters by BSG to his mother. Most of the letters were written in elegant handwriting in Bangla from various places by BSG. A precious photograph of his Varanasi days when he was presented by a self-autographed book by the then Vice Chancellor of Banaras Hindu University Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan is a notable picture. Another illustration shows, a book presented to him and his wife by Verrier Elwin, who was working with him at Varanasi.

The fourth Chapter titled 'Professional Life' with 52 photographs contains mainly the photographs used by him in the racial classification of India's people. It must be known that the racial research of BSG was done before the Partition of India and, therefore, it also covered the present-day Pakistan and Bangladesh as well. Special mention may be made of his intensive researches done on the social and biological aspects of the Kalash tribe of Chitral District of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province of present day Pakistan. This chapter also mentions of his valuable contribution of the skeletal researches from Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro and Maski. In the fifth Chapter 'Vision and Mission', a total of 93 photographs and 6 illustrations are presented depicting photographs of his fieldwork, his interaction with the co-workers and his administrative dexterity. His vision is clearly reflected through the pictures as he was desperately trying hard to transform the Department of Anthropology, Government of India into a vibrant institution having interdisciplinary research with myriad laboratories. The photographs of three foreign scholars namely, E. C. Buchi, L. Cipriani and Chie Nakane was the hallmark of the Department. The main highlight of this chapter is the visual presence of Uma Guha, his wife and an accomplished anthropologist having trained in psychology from India and cultural anthropology from Cornell University.

The Chapter 'Fieldwork and Collaborative Research' contains 139 photographs showing his fieldwork expeditions to various parts of the country. In this chapter, we take a tour of anthropological visits to Jaunsaris, Santals, Onges, Mannan of Cochin, Nagas, Adi/Abor, Garo, Riang, Rankhol, Uchai and Kaipeng with the researchers hailing from the Department of Anthropology under the leadership of BSG indulging in rigorous fieldwork. What is interesting to note is the attire of BSG in the fieldwork. He is seen mostly in western dress and a hat, except for his visit to Jaunsar-Bawar, where he was seen wearing Nehru Achkan and a cap. The next Chapter titled 'Association and Activities' consists of 28 plates with 23 photographs showing his links with the academic bodies and association with intellectuals. This chapter also shows a touchy testimonial that he had issued to Dr. T. N. Pandit who was giving him company in one of his visits to Delhi University. Dr. Pandit eventually joined the Department of Anthropology, Government of India with quite an eventful tenure at Andaman and Nicobar Islands which included his direct contact with the Sentinelese. His testimonials, it seems, were very sought after, as I was also shown one such commendation by Prof. I. P. Singh given to him by BSG.

The Chapter 'Post Retirement Endeavour' consists of 23 illustrations with 18 photographs. This chapter illustrates the unfortunate incidence of his demise in a railway accident at a place named Ghatsila. It also shows the obituaries that were written on his death by anthropologists and other dignitaries from India and abroad. In the subsequent chapters, the awards received by him, his notable publications and commemorative programmes organized in his honour on his centenary and 125th birth anniversary are shown with memorable photographs. A special chapter is devoted to his sole doctoral student from Lithuania named Antanas Peskevicius-Poske who submitted his doctoral thesis titled 'Physical Affinity of Shin-Speaking People of the Western Himalaya' in the year 1936 at Calcutta University. But the second World War interrupted the evaluation process and he died without a doctorate. It was only in 2014 that he was awarded a D.Litt. (Honoris causa) which was received by his daughter on his behalf.

The book, on the whole, is a unique collection of indelible reminiscences on the life and times of B. S. Guha, who will always stand apart as a resolute and astute administrator, discerning intellectual and above all a camaraderie that had the ability to agglutinate a cadre of dedicated workers for a larger cause. If anthropology stands tall amidst the various sciences in India today, the role of B. S Guha as the prominent driver in its journey is irrefutable. Dr. Duary has done a commendable job in compiling evanescent memoirs at one place and the outcome is for all to see. This visual document will be long remembered by the anthropological fraternity.

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