

EDITORIAL

Abhijit Guha

Public Anthropology in India

Why Anthropology is important?

Anthropology is an important subject not only for the Europeans and Americans but also for the Indians and particularly for the ordinary citizens. Why this is so? Because, the subject is no less important than History and Geography and it should be taught from the high school level. Hence, there is an urgent need for making Anthropology visible in all spheres of public life. Apart from technical pieces, anthropologists have engaged themselves in popular writings on public issues in the form of books, newspaper articles, blogs, and social media posts, and they are reaching the public domain outside the academia. This is because of the fact that anthropology is a unique subject, which looks at human beings from a bio-cultural perspective. Unlike other social science subjects, for example, History, Economics, Geography and Political Science, Anthropology uses a special method to look at human societies and cultures, which anthropologists call fieldwork with participant observation. Put very simply, being humans, anthropologists are observers of human beings in groups but not under controlled situations as in the Physical and Biological Sciences.. The popular maxim, sometime used in anthropology textbooks: 'Field is the laboratory of anthropology' is not true. There is no laboratory for the anthropologists, only behaviour of human beings as it occurs in societies.¹

A subject like anthropology, which I have described above, has immense public importance in India, which is full of biological and societal diversities interacting in both cooperative and conflicting manner throughout the centuries.

Public Anthropology in the West

During the last two decades a group of anthropologists in USA and Great Britain have been trying to develop a kind of anthropology, which they designated as 'Public Anthropology',

although the necessity of the attention to public issues by the anthropologists were drawn much earlier (Huizer, 1979; Peacock, 1997) along with the issue of the public image of anthropology (Shore, 1996).

In his articles and a book published during 2000-2019, Robert Borofsky, an American anthropologist has been pushing the agenda and justifications for public anthropology (Borofsky, 2000a&b; Borofsky, 2002; Borofsky& Lauri, 2019; Borofsky, 2019). He developed a *Center for Public Anthropology* and was among the founders of a journal named *Public Anthropology* (Vine, 2011) and developed a course on Public Anthropology in USA.² In his article 'Public Anthropology. Where to? What next?' published in the May 2000 issue of the *Anthropology News*, Borofsky informed that with Renato Rosaldo he coined the term and 'the phrase is taking on a life of its own'. But what does this phrase mean? In Borofsky's words:

Public anthropology engages issues and audiences beyond today's self-imposed disciplinary boundaries. The focus is on conversations with broad audiences about broad concerns. Although some anthropologists already engage today's big questions regarding rights, health, violence, governance and justice, many refine narrow (and narrower) problems that concern few (and fewer) people outside the discipline. Public anthropology seeks to address broad critical concerns in ways that others beyond the discipline are able to understand what anthropologists can offer to the reframing and easing--if not necessarily always resolving of present-day dilemmas (Borofsky: 2000b:9).

How does public anthropology will address the 'broad critical concerns' beyond the discipline? According to Borofsky:

For public anthropology objectivity lies less in the pronouncements of authorities than in conversations among concerned parties. "Truth" does not reside in the exhortations of experts nor in the palaces of power. It develops gradually in the arguments and counterarguments of people. One pronouncement by one expert does not suffice. What is required are challenges and counter-challenges. The broader and more comprehensive the challenges, the broader and more comprehensive the authority of the claims (Borofsky: 2000b:10).

In Great Britain public anthropology also became an issue, and we find in the pages of *Anthropology Today*, a 2009 Guest Editorial entitled 'Making anthropology public' by Nancy Schepher-Hughes in which she asked at the end of her article:

If anthropology cannot be put to service as a tool for human liberation why are we bothering with it at all? A public anthropology can play its part in all these developments: it has an opportunity to become an arbiter of emancipatory change not just within the discipline, but for humanity itself (Schepher-Huges: 2009:3).

The label 'Public Anthropology' as coined by Borofsky and his supporters got challenged in the pages of *Anthropology News*. In its September 2000 issue, Merrill Singer wrote a commentary entitled 'Why I am not a public anthropologist'. In the article, Singer refused to accept Borofsky's 'Public Anthropology' different from 'Applied Anthropology' particularly when anthropologists make important contributions in 'many areas of contemporary public concern' which included environmental issues, nutrition, education, ethics, land reform, and community development. In his words:

For thousands' of applied anthropologists the Borofsky thesis is invalid. Indeed from A for “aging” to Z for “zoos”, applied anthropologists are heavily engaged in public work and often comment on pressing issues... However, given that many applied anthropologists already do the kinds of things that are now being described as PA, it is hard to understand why a new label is needed, except as a device for distancing public anthropologists from applied anthropology (Singer:2000:6).

In another perceptive review article published in *Anthropology Today*, Hugh Gusterson depicted how anthropologists through the print media in USA are still being projected as scientists dealing with strange customs in home and abroad. According to Gusterson, the significant researches of anthropologists on the destructive impact of a liberalized economy on local ecosystems and culture have been largely ignored in the popular media, which inevitably doomed the prospective career of a real public anthropology. I quote:

The problem here is not just that most academic anthropologists are not very good at communicating with the public, but that anthropologists are constructed in the public sphere as having little to say about some of the most urgent and pressing political and economic controversies of the day. Through the 20th century a division of labour arose and ossified in the social sciences, and we are now imprisoned by its lingering force.

According to this division of labour, economists have jurisdiction over economics, and political scientists have jurisdiction over politics and war. Anthropologists insisted from the beginning of the 20th century that they produced holistic descriptions of entire societies, including their economic and political systems, but we were only given a permit to do this as long as we confined ourselves to those marginal societies of little interest to academic economists and political scientists (Gusterson:2013: 13).

Amid all these new pronouncements on public anthropology and the controversies around it, one of the most interesting things about this discourse in USA and Great Britain is the absence of Indian public anthropology (Bangstad, 2017). Just after I finished this editorial Robert Borofsky sent me a recent book by email entitled *Revitalizing Anthropology: Let's Focus the Field on Benefitting Others* edited by him and published in 2023. The book has come out from Borofsky's Center for a Public Anthropology located at Kailua, Hawaii and has a Spanish edition. The book contained a long blurb section wherein short texts by three Indian anthropologists (Subhadra Mitra Channa, Abhijit Guha and Subho Roy) have been included. This, shows that the Indian anthropologists, for the first time are in the list of anthropologists who could comment on public anthropology at the global level. The book has full chapters and abstracts written by graduate students from Australia, Canada, China, Guatemala, Japan, the United States, and Zimbabwe. There is however, no text from the graduate students from India. India still remains absent in the main text of the book! Sad enough!

Public Anthropology in India

The pioneering studies done by Tarak Chandra Das on Bengal famine (Das,1943), social tensions among the refugees in Bengal by B.S.Guha (Guha, 1959), resettlement of refugees in Andaman Islands by Surajit Sinha (Sinha, 1955), displacement of people by industries and big dams by B.K.Roy Burman (Roy Burman,1961) and Irawati Karve and Jai Nimbkar (Karve and Nimbkar,1969) and also the later pioneering policy focused bio-social researches of Pranab Ganguly (Ganguly, 1975: 7-27) and Amitabha Basu (Basu 1974: 17-23) at the Anthropological Survey of India and the Indian Statistical Institute did not find any place in the writings of the public anthropologists of the western countries (see for example, Beck, 2009; Besteman, 2013; Fassin, 2018; Tauber and Zinn, 2015).³ In his aforementioned

2019 book, Borofsky briefly described the methodology of the Nobel Laureate economists Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo on their randomized trials in Indian villages about the distribution of mosquito nets among the poor Indian villagers (Borofsky, 2019b). There was no further discussion or description on the enormous researches done by the Indian anthropologists on development, displacement, disease, health and nutrition among the poor and marginalized people in the book written by Borofsky. In this connection it may be worthwhile to mention the publication of a special issue of *Indian Anthropologist* entitled 'Anthropology's contributions to public policy' in 2014 wherein the authors demonstrated how the different tools developed by anthropologists became useful to understand the social and political processes of policymaking in India (Pellisary, 2014). We also do not find any discussion by the western proponents of public anthropology on this valuable contribution of Indian anthropologists. In sum, Western public anthropology still largely remained oblivious about the public anthropology in India.⁴

Public anthropology in India has a long tradition since the independence of the country and unlike western countries public anthropology is inseparably connected with nation-building. The Indian anthropologists did make attempts to study the major problems (viz. famine, rehabilitation of refugees and development caused displacement) encountered by the country in the early periods of nation building as exemplified in the works of B.S.Guha, T.C.Das, N.K.Bose, Irawati Karve, Surajit Sinha, and their successors. Under the changing times and circumstances, the future of public anthropology in India lie in carrying forward this remarkable tradition of anthropology developed by the pioneers in the task of nation building in Indian anthropology beyond its colonial legacy (Guha, 2021: 59-75 & 2022a & b).

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the editorial board of the *Journal of the Indian Anthropological Society* for inviting me to write this Editorial. I am also indebted to Sumahan Bandyopadhyay, editor, *Man in India* for first inspiring me to write an article on public anthropology in the Centenary issue of the journal.

REFERENCES

- Bangstad, S. 2017. Anthropological publics, public anthropology: an introduction. In: *Anthropology of Our Times: An Edited Anthology in Public Anthropology*, S. Bangstad (ed.) pp.1-27. New York, Springer Nature.
- Barth, F. 2001. *Envisioning a More Public Anthropology: Interview with Fredrik Barth by Robert Borofsky*. (<https://courses.lumenlearning.com/sunyculturalanthropology/chapter/barth/> accessed on 03.10.2021).
- Basu, A. 1974. An anthropologist in search of a purpose: the test-case of the Pahira of Manbhum. *Indian Museum Bulletin* 9 (2):17-23.
- Beck, S. 2009. Introduction: Public anthropology. *Anthropology in Action* 16(2): 1–13.
- Besteman, C. 2013. Three reflections on public anthropology. *Anthropology Today* 29(6):3-6.
- Borofsky, R. 2019. *An Anthropology of Anthropology: Is it Time to Shift Paradigms?* Kailua Hi, Center for a Public Anthropology.
- Borofsky, R. and Lauri, A. 2019. Public anthropology in changing times. *Public Anthropologist* 1:3-19
- Borofsky, R. 2002. The four subfields: Anthropologists as mythmakers. *American Anthropologist* 104(2):463-480.
- 2000a. To laugh or cry? *Anthropology News*. February, pp.9-10.
- 2000b. Public anthropology. Where to? What next? *Anthropology News*, May, pp.9-10.
- Borofsky, R.(Ed.) 2023. Revitalizing Anthropology: Let's Focus the Field on Benefitting Others. Kailua. Center for a Public Anthropology
- Das, T. C. 1941. *Cultural anthropology in the service of the individual and the nation*. Presidential address delivered in the section of anthropology in the twenty-eighth Indian Science Congress, pp. 1–29): Benares, Indian Science Congress Association.
- Das, T. C. 1949. *Bengal Famine (1943): As Revealed in a Survey of the Destitutes of Calcutta*. Calcutta, University of Calcutta.
- Fassin, D. 2018. The public presence of anthropology: a critical approach. *kristiketnografi—Swedish Journal of Anthropology* 1(1):13-23.
- Ganguly, P. 1975. The Negritos of Little Andaman Islands: a primitive people facing extinction. *Indian Museum Bulletin* 10(1): 7-27.
- Guha, A. 2021. Nation building on the margins: how the anthropologists of India contributed? *Sociological Bulletin* 70(1): 59-75.
- Guha, A. 2022a. Enhancing the public visibility of anthropology: An auto-ethnographic account of the journey of a practitioner. *Man in India*. 102(3-4): 175-196
- Guha, A. 2022b. *Nation-Building in Indian Anthropology: Beyond the Colonial Encounter*. New Delhi, Manohar and London, Routledge.

- Guha, B. S. 1959. *Studies in social tensions among the refugees from eastern Pakistan* [Memoir no. 1]. Calcutta, Department of Anthropology, Government of India.
- Gusterson, H. 2013. Anthropology in the news? *Anthropology Today* 29(6):11-13.
- Huizer, G. 1979. Anthropology and politics: from naiveté: toward liberation. In: *The Politics of Anthropology: From Colonialism and Sexism Toward a View from Below*, G.Huizer and B.Mannheim (eds.) pp.3-41. The Hague, Mouton Publishers.
- Ingold, T. 2018. *Anthropology: Why it Matters?* Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Karve, I., and Nimbkar, J. 1969. *A Survey of the People Displaced through the Koyna dam*. Poona, Deccan College.
- McGranahan, C. 2006. Introduction: public anthropology. *India Review* 5(3-4):255-267.
- Peacock, J.L. 1997. The future of anthropology. *American Anthropologist* 99(1):9-17.
- Pellissery, S. 2014. Anthropology's contributions to public policy: introduction to special issue. *Indian Anthropologist* 44(1):1-20.
- Roy Burman, B. K. 1961. *Social Processes in the Industrialization of Rourkela (with reference to displacement and rehabilitation of Tribal and other backward people)*. New Delhi, Office of the Registrar General, India.
- Sarkar, S. S. 1951. The place of human biology in anthropology and its utility in the service of the nation. *Man in India* 31(1): 1–22.
- Scheper-Huges, N. 2009. Making anthropology public. *Anthropology Today* 25(4):1-3.
- Shore, C. 1996. Anthropology's identity crisis: the politics of public image. *Anthropology Today* 12(2):2-5.
- Singer, M. 2000. Why I am not a public anthropologist? *Anthropology News* September: 6-7.
- Sinha, S. 1955. *Resettlement of East Pakistan Refugees in Andaman Islands*. Calcutta, Government of West Bengal.
- Tauber, E. and Zinn, D. (Eds.) 2015. *The Public Value of Anthropology: Engaging Critical Social Issues Through Ethnography*. Bozen-Bolzano, Bozen-Bolzano University Press.
- Vine, D. 2011. "Public Anthropology" in its second decade: Robert Borofsky's Center for a Public Anthropology. *American Anthropologist* (New Series) 113(2):336-340.

End Notes

¹For a recent interesting discussion one may read the first chapter of Tim Ingold's book *Anthropology: why it matters* (2018). As regards field and laboratory Ingold moved further to view fieldwork as an activity where the anthropologists take others seriously and receive knowledge from the people whom they study.

²The editorial board of the journal of *Public Anthropology* is dominated by the anthropologists of USA and European countries with only 4 members of from Peru, China, South Africa and Japan out of 43 members (<https://brill.com/view/journals/puan/puanoverview.xml?contents=editorialContent-48382>. Accessed on 11.10.2021).

³The potential of the biological and social-cultural anthropologists towards nation building in post-colonial India was highlighted by T.C.Das and S.S.Sarkar in their Indian Science Congress lectures in 1941 and 1951 (Das, 1941; Sarkar, 1951). Amitabha Basu, a student of Das and Sarkar carried their legacy and raised the issue of moral commitment of the Indian anthropologists towards the people from whom we collect our data (Basu, 1974).

⁴Interestingly, Frederik Barth in his interview entitled 'Envisioning a more public anthropology' taken by Rob Borofsky on 18th April 2001 mentioned that there was more 'public interest' in anthropology and anthropologists in India, Mexico Brazil ,and in Scandinavia (Barth 2001). In the rest of his interview Barth, however did not elaborate on this statement (Center for Public Anthropology 2001 <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-culturalanthropology/chapter/barth/> accessed on 03.10.2021).

Former Professor in Anthropology, Vidyasagar University &
Former Senior Fellow, Indian Council of Social Science Research
Institute of Development Studies Kolkata.
E-mail Id: aguhavu@gmail.com