

Rajat Kanti Das. *A Profile of Socio-Cultural Anthropology: Growing complexities, Renewal of emphasis and Emerging issues* Delhi, Kalpaz Publications (2023). ISBN 978-93-5722-352-2 (hard bound). Pages 256. Price: Hard Bound ₹ 1000.

This book contains eleven chapters that are rather wide in their scope. Some have dealt with frequently discussed issues in anthropology, especially in India like influence of British anthropology on its Indian counterpart; changing trends in tribal studies; ethnicity and identity formation; social structure signifying change in meaning and context; traditional knowledge and belief system in biodiversity preservation; and food from bio-cultural perspective. Some chapters have dealt with not-so-common issues like political space allowed to people in and outside state; knowledge and ignorance in ethnographic study; and Rabindranath Tagore's universal humanism. It is notable that political economy of most of the above issues have been considered important.

In the first chapter the author has explained theoretical premise of the book. He has noted shift of anthropology from search of 'pure' knowledge to addressing problems of the people. About a century back Radcliffe Brown's description of the Andaman Islanders remained silent about devastation caused by colonisation programmes while in more recent times plight of the Yanomamo received global attention. Paradigm shift in anthropology has been related by the author with political developments around the globe. He, however, has drawn attention to the gap between proactive spirit in cultural studies and value attached to traditional anthropological concepts about local cultures. It has also been noted that large scale social formations like nation-states are becoming proxy to cultural identity and basis of solidarity. Relatively new areas of interest in anthropology have been listed; some of those are cultural and historical reconstruction of gender, sexuality, division of labour in capitalist as well as non-capitalist societies, critique of male-governed anthropology and critical studies of the LGBTQ. Role of subjectivity in studies in social-cultural anthropology has been highlighted.

Second chapter of the book traces links between British and Indian anthropology, which mostly was a one-way transaction. The author has emphasised how ideas and practices of the discipline evolved with social-political developments like colonialism and war. That imperialist states have allegedly used anthropology in their own interest has frequently been discussed. In post-colonial years we are realising how our thought processes have also been controlled by imperial discourses.

Western influence on Indian anthropologists was not restricted to British sources alone, the author has mentioned influences of French sociology, especially of Durkheim. In this portion varied ideas of functionalism and structuralism, Firth's social organisation. Gluckman's idea of conflict, Marxian influences, influence of Barth and Levi Strauss have been discussed followed by a discussion on evolution of kinship studies with emphasis on role of kin and ethnic groups influencing production relations and their political implications. A few more lines on influence of American anthropology, especially since 1950s, could make the discussion wholesome.

The author has noted, most of the early Indian anthropologists belonged to upper-caste and middle-class and they acted as carriers to bring in western influence in Indian anthropology. Consequently, "...if there was anything like the Indian anthropological perspective of society and culture, it almost entirely followed either British or American traditions or both...", noted the author. Indigenisation of Indian anthropology in post-colonial period has remained incomplete; 'other' could not become 'self'; anthropologists did not consider classic Indian texts and oral traditions seriously. It is not that nobody looked at Indian society from the other end; the author has mentioned the pioneering works of F. G. Bailey, who studied mercantile economy introduced by British colonialism and administrative machinery of the modern state.

The third chapter discusses new trends in tribal studies. It must be noted that in India the category of 'tribe' is used by many without critical examination. While Virginius Xaxa describes tribe as a colonial construct; G. S. Ghurye conceives the category as real, they are 'backward' Hindus. The latter view robs the people of their cultural autonomy. Politics of nomenclature like *Adivasi*, *Vanavasi*, Indigenous, or *Dalit* is important too, but eventually the constitutional provisions affect construction and use of all those categories. Drawing empirical evidence from Northeast India, the author has argued that that part of the country differs from the rest in its perception of state, sub-nationalism, and tribe. He has discussed approaches of integration and assimilation in name of tribal development that causes de-culturation. An elaborate discussion of historical and recent developments in Manipur has been attempted to explain consequences of competition for achieving indigenous status within the saga framework of the state. It is

indeed a paradox that the state does not accept demand for indigenous status by any section of Indian people and yet celebrate International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples. The author has critiqued role of state in interfering with religion, history, and tradition of such people allegedly to gain popularity.

The fourth chapter deals with issues related to ethnicity and identity formation; the discussion has mostly been restricted to post-Second War period that also marked end of colonial rule in many parts of the world. However, in India people started taking interest in collective identity during colonial period; several communities demanded change in nomenclature during census operations and linked it with their social ranking.

The processes of traditionalization, modernization, identity formation and politicization of identities have been discussed drawing examples from alliance and conflict between ethnic groups in Africa. While distinguishing between allegiance to nation states and to primordial ties the author has mentioned multiple manifestations of ethnicity, including political ones. He has also mentioned the phenomena of construction and re-interpretation of the past often based on ethnocentric ideas, which can lead to violent conflicts and even ethnic cleansing.

Chapter five deals with 'social structure signifying change in meaning and context' where the author has highlighted the contradistinction between social and individual. In the process macro-developments have been linked with micro-actions, social structure with individual actions, and how anarchy may stand for liberty. Plurality of individual contexts in modern political orders, as well as transformation of prestige hierarchies to power hierarchies are some of the recent developments. It has been noted, exogenous factors controlling lives and livelihoods of small-scale communities make it difficult for the people to maintain internal balance, and eventually internalization of the external becomes normal. The author has also elaborated instances of biology-based-identity, which was manifested during Covid 19 pandemic – people with different look were held responsible for causing misery.

The author has noted, social structure now leads to diversity and not to uniformity or integrity and has suggested some research agenda on basis of the postulate. A major one is, analysis of “the working of 'outside factors' in structural changes and the way they have found an entry into tribe's functional system.” Methodological problems like difficulties in reliable data collection has been flagged and necessity for dialogical exercise has been emphasised.

'Search for political space and meaning in and outside the state' is an immensely significant issue; sixth chapter of the book deals with it. It has been claimed that the issue can properly be understood "... in terms of an ideally conceived, structurally bound community like tribe as it goes through the process of ethnic group formation." Such communities have been subjected to hegemony of state and different political parties, especially in situations of conflict between national level politics and local identity politics or even radical movements. It has been admitted that bourgeois nationalism has failed to strengthen the tribes materially or culturally. On the contrary, those communities became part of 'larger political life and power' in the 'national setting'. Homogenisation of political operations by state has been identified as counter-productive for cultural identity of the tribes and such manoeuvres often undermine territorial rights of the people. Such neglect becomes conspicuous when nation states split territory of culture groups by creating interstate and international boundaries. Many a times nation states attempt social and cultural engineering and support marketing of culture at the cost of indigenous identities.

The seventh chapter deals with the issue of knowledge-ignorance dichotomy in ethnographic study. Basic proposition of the discussion is that ignorance, which is inverse of knowledge, is apolitical phenomenon. By deliberately withdrawing knowledge from some people and making them dependent on ignorance, they are subjected to manipulation and exploitation by the powerful. Drawing from anthropological literature the author has discussed why and how communities handle knowledge and non-knowledge. Identity of a community is usually multi-layered, but an impression of homogenous character is often created by self and by others ignoring diversity. Thus, it has been argued, community as signifier of identity is full of contradictions that are, "... primarily the result of knowledge-ignorance opposition."

The eighth chapter has juxtaposed humanistic anthropology and Rabindranath Tagore's universal humanism; it explains how and why those ideas differ. Despite lack of uniformity in their views, humanistic anthropologists restrict their application to specific contexts. Tagore's universal humanism, on the other hand, is based on ideas of eternity and timelessness. Tagore accentuated certain recurrent dilemma of humanism which were faced by humanistic anthropologists too, but those differed widely in their approach, mystic encounters, which drew criticism from materialists, versus empirical experiences. The saga of socialist and evolutionary humanism in Europe has also been discussed and compared. It has been noted that the latter was used to claim racial superiority by the Nazis, which in effect was opposed to humanism.

The topic of 'Traditional knowledge and belief system in biodiversity preservation has been discussed in the ninth chapter where it has been argued, ecological systems are not 'self-regulatory' or 'self-persisting' in presence of humans. It may be noted, altering nature to meet basic and not-so-basic human needs received support from certain theological schools that claimed god created everything for humans. However, local eco-system people, many of whom are indigenous, considered humans to be part of nature and among them philosophy of prudence can be found. The author has identified market economy as a catalyst for destruction of biodiversity. States and corporates have often affected alienation of *Adivasi* communities from their resources. In response, the concerned people have sometimes offered resistance, as we have recently witnessed when Hasdeo forest was being cleared. The gulf between knowledge about biological and other kinds of resources held by *Adivasi* communities to maintain their life ways and livelihoods, and that of the state and the corporates created to dominate or to make profit, have been noted in this chapter.

Chapter ten examines food intake and other related issues from bio-cultural perspective, which is a departure from socio-cultural orientation of earlier chapters. This discourse is largely based on works of Mary Douglas. The author has brought up issues of food security, equality and equity in situations of inequality and conflict. That people's right of growing and eating food of their own choice is not often recognised by the state is another problem and the local eco-system people are the worst sufferers. Certain health issues including personality disorder and narcotics have also been discussed along with food and noted that effects of social factors on health are being recognised in recent years. However, it is difficult, if not impossible, to have an inclusive medical regime where practitioners of indigenous systems are shown respect, especially when pharmaceutical giants are present in the field.

In the concluding chapter author has examined social-cultural anthropology's search for meaning and credibility. Though anthropological accounts helped colonial governments to administer their subjects, there was little space for empathy. It continued in post-colonial times too, but Constitution of India has impacted state-people relation substantially. The author has noted conspicuous shift from western standpoints and subsequent acceptance of subjectivity and political perspectives in recent decades. Earlier approaches to identify tribe, people, and community have been contested; it has been noted that scope of anthropological studies have been extended from ethnos to nation.

According to the author such a shift in political life of the citizens has caused growing intolerance, chauvinism, and provincialism that has led to insider-outsider discrimination, localism, and extreme ethnocentrism. Since the idea of nation was borrowed from West during colonial period, such anomalies are not surprising.

The author has admitted that he was requested to write a textbook, which admittedly he did not. It is not a typical teachers' handbook either. The author has picked up a wide range of topics and has discussed those drawing examples from different studies including his own on 'tribes' of northeast India. The book would undoubtedly help teachers, students, and researchers of anthropology, and other kinds of readers to gain critical understanding of contemporary discourses in the discipline.

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