

The Holistic Approach to Anthropology: B. S. Guha's Vision of the Anthropological Survey of India

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It is indeed an honour to have been invited to deliver the second B.S. Guha Memorial Lecture at the Shillong office of the Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI). Leaving aside the Head Office, the establishment in Shillong is the second oldest in the Survey, the first being the one in Port Blair in the Andamans that was set up around 1951. The Survey seems to have maintained the pecking order when organising these Memorial Lectures, as I learnt that the first one was delivered in Port Blair.

I thank the members of the Survey, especially the Director, Prof. K. K. Misra, for giving me this privilege. I am conscious of the fact that this is a tribute to one of the most illustrious individuals of our country. Dr. Guha was the founder Director of the Survey.

In this deliberation I shall provide a brief biographical sketch of Dr. Guha, besides highlighting his contribution in the making of the Anthropological Survey of India. Finally, I shall touch upon his scholarly work in anthropology with some discussion on its contemporaneity.

The intellectual journey of B.S. Guha is indeed remarkable. After completing master degree in philosophy he was inspired to go on to study anthropology in the U.S. after which he qualified as a professional anthropologist specialising in physical anthropology. His transition from philosophy to a technical discipline with rigours of large-scale measurement, observation and recording is fascinating. This offers a glimpse into his capacities and the felicity with which he was capable of moving between the intellectual requirements of liberal arts and science. It also points to the diligence and perseverance that he must have had to pursue another discipline in his late youth. His perseverance of course is revealed in the way he established the all-India organisational structure of the Anthropological Survey of India carved out of the Zoological Survey of India in 1945.

Biraja Sankar Guha was born on August 15, 1894 in Shillong, in the erstwhile Assam. He obtained an M.A. in philosophy from the University of Calcutta. Guha did not confine himself to philosophy for long. In 1917, he took a government assignment as a Researcher

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in anthropology under the Government of Bengal. During his tenure as a researcher, he studied the Khasis in the erstwhile Assam. The merit of his fieldwork among the Khasis helped him earn the Hemenway Fellowship in Harvard University in 1920. In 1922, he received the degree of A.M. in anthropology from Harvard. He held a position of Special Research Officer in the Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., undertaking field investigation among the Utes and the Navajos of Colorado and New Mexico. Guha was awarded a Ph.D. in 1924 from Harvard for his dissertation on the racial basis of the caste system in India.

Dr. Guha came back to India after completing his studies in the U.S. His return coincided with the introduction of anthropology as an academic discipline in Indian universities. In 1926, he joined, as a Lecturer, the Department of Anthropology in the University of Calcutta. In 1927, the Government of India created for the first time a position of Anthropologist for the Anthropological Section of the Zoological Survey of India and Dr. Guha was appointed in the post. He was also made the Officer-in-Charge of the Section.

Long before Dr. Guha joined the Zoological Survey of India, attempts were made by its successive directors to impress upon the government the need for opening a separate, full-fledged institution similar to the Zoological Survey for ethnography or anthropology. The first recommendation made by Dr. Nelson Anandale for an institute of eminence to carry out ethnographic survey was made in 1916, the year in which the Zoological Survey of India was carved out of the Zoological and Anthropological Sections of the Indian Museum. The next recommendation was in 1927 by Lt. Col. R.B. Seymour Sewell (see R.K.Bhattacharya and Jayanta Sarkar (eds.) *Anthropology of B.S. Guha*, p.3, Kolkata, Anthropological Survey of India, 1996) . Finally, in December 1945, the Anthropological Survey of India, headed by Dr. Guha, was founded. Dr. Guha as director served the Anthropological Survey for nine years.

I have named today's topic "The Holistic Approach to Anthropology: B.S. Guha's Vision of the Anthropological Survey of India." I am very conscious of my use of the term 'holistic approach' in anthropology I am very conscious how holistic approach in anthropology is defined. Holistic approach is to understand the relationship between man's physical and cultural properties. If we look into Dr. Guha's organisation of research in the Survey, we observe that he gave due coverage to develop and pursue both physical and cultural aspects of the discipline. Under the physical or biological aspect, the following studies were undertaken: anthropometry, somatology, craniometry, osteometry and palaeontology. Under the cultural aspect, Dr.Guha gave noticeable importance to an integral part of culture, that is, language. Linguistics, namely survey of scripts and recording of speech and music, was included. Language expresses man's feelings, perceptions and the inner world of his mind. Feelings and perceptions are as varied as culture and tradition. Language provides a community with the ability to continue its tradition and culture through generations. I enumerate the other items of study in the following lines: folklore, i.e. study of oral history, tradition and custom; art, craft and traditional or ancient technology; economics including land alienation, debt and barter

system. Besides, psychological, especially socio-psychological, studies added another dimension to cultural anthropology.

Dr. Guha's proposal submitted to the government with a view to successfully execute his scheme of research in the Survey right after it was founded reads:

To study tribes and other communities that form the population of India both from the biological and cultural points of view;

To study and preserve human skeletal remains, both modern and archaeological;

To collect samples of arts and crafts of the tribes in India

From the above we can appreciate the focus and brevity of the document of intent presented to the government - the bureaucracy demands much more verbosity from us these days and I leave to you to work out the reason!

Dr. Guha's proposal got its full support from the government.

Let me now look at the tangible aspect of the Survey's research infrastructure that Dr. Guha built. Dr. Guha established laboratories for biochemistry, radiology, human biology, osteology and psychology. For documentation of custom and tradition, art and craft, economic practice and technology, and way of living, photography and cine-photography units were opened. These units ushered in scope for visual anthropology in our country long before it became an established and recognised area of study in anthropology. Since the Survey's inception, a well-equipped library had slowly been put together through the persistence of Dr. Guha. During his tenure, around 20,000 books on anthropology, psychology, linguistics, economics and related subjects and a sizeable collection of books on European arts were procured.

Initially Dr. Guha thought of one centralised office of the Anthropological Survey in a metropolitan city, either Delhi or Calcutta. Later he realised it would be inconvenient to carry out sustained field investigation in a comparatively inaccessible area located far from the central or head office. The study of little-known Andaman tribes and the imminent issue of rehabilitating refugees in the islands following Partition resulted in establishing a sub-office at Port Blair in the Andamans in 1951. Within a few years, the other important sub-office, or sub-station, was opened in Shillong for carrying out fieldwork among the numerous tribes of the North-East living away from the plains and other parts of the country.

I have left out two of the policy resolutions - one, using the Survey as an advanced training centre for students and administrators, and two, to publish research results collected by the researchers of the Survey through books and periodicals for dissemination of this acquired knowledge on the people of the country. This demonstrates the range of his vision and plans in making the Survey's work relevant to the academic community.

Leaving aside a very short stint of teaching assignment in philosophy before he went to the U.S., Dr. Guha took up his first professional anthropological work among the Khasis of the erstwhile Assam. This research was fieldwork based. Throughout his career spanning

a period of roughly 40 years of active research, Dr. Guha was acutely aware of the strength of fieldwork-based anthropological studies. The mainspring of anthropological research is fieldwork and Dr. Guha felt excited about fieldwork and championed it. Dr. Guha's experience in field investigation was phenomenal. He did fieldwork among indigenous tribes of Colorado and New Mexico. Soon after returning from the U.S., and joining the Zoological Survey of India as Anthropologist, Dr. Guha undertook field investigation covering the length and breadth of British India. He had the rare experience of taking part in a Government expedition to the North-West Frontier Area. Before coming to the Anthropological Survey of India, his research was largely confined to physical anthropology. His preoccupation was racial ethnology of India and he did seminal work on racial elements in the population of India (see B.S. Guha, *Racial Elements in the Population* London, Oxford University Press, 1944).

Dr. Guha, with his research colleagues from the Anthropological Survey, identified the areas, namely Andamans and the North-East, of the country that called for urgent investigation and research. This was done in the very early phase after founding the Survey.

Now let us try to read the mind of Dr. Guha by consulting his "Report of a Survey of Inhabitants of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands During 1948-49", published in 1952 in the *Bulletin of the Department of Anthropology* (Government of India), 1:1, 1-7. I quote copiously:

The problem of the Aborigines of Andaman Islands...is not the same as that of the other...tribes of India. These people are some of the most ancient remnants of human race still surviving...The need among them is not so much the spread of education and social uplift as the arrest of decline in population which has been most alarming. (emphasis mine)

...The hostile branch of the Andamanese tribes known as the Jarawa-Onge-Sentinelese group fortunately has been spared the fate of their more "friendly" kinsmen.

...Very little can be done now to save the Andamanese proper who have paid for their friendliness by being driven to the verge of extinction and it now is a question of time before they would completely disappear."

In recent years the Survey undertook extensive work among the Jarawas. I am sure those who took part in the aforesaid investigation would feel how correctly Dr. Guha pinpointed the crux of the problem concerning these pristine hunter-gatherer people. He was very focussed and direct and to the point in stating the priorities of our interventions - we have to focus on population conservation going beyond national understanding of social uplift.

I quote once again from the same article, page 4 - "We gave them food, cigarettes...The presents given were iron nails, strip of red cloth, tea and tobacco leaves. Among all these objects what they liked most were the tobacco leaves."

I quote from Dr. Guha's another article "A comparative study of the somatic traits of the Onges of the Little Andaman" published in *Bulletin of the Department of Anthropology, Government of India* 1954, 3:2, 117-143 - "No explanation for the persistent hostility of the Andamanese tribes towards strangers has so far been given from the time they came to be known to the outside world..."

Dr. Guha was clearly bothered about the lack of explanation for hostility of the Andamanese tribes towards outsiders. This raises the question if the tribes are by nature hostile or display hostility due to feelings of insecurity. I would like to direct attention to the general approach when we encounter the 'other' - the question of our protocol, etiquette and attitude. In our eagerness to know we probably show a disregard to these civilities. We try to buy friendship for building up rapport; we try to intrude into others' territory without being invited and carry presents that we perceive would be appreciated to assert our friendliness. It is noticeable that the Jarawas of the present day are picking up the habits of tobacco, processed foods like biscuits and deep fried snacks (samosas) etc. for which they do not have the required dietary readiness. We are still to learn their biological/physiological responses to sugar and salt as additives to food items.

I quote from another article, "The Role of Social Sciences in Nation Building", in *Sociological Bulletin*, 7:2, 148-151, 1958:

...Integration of ethnic groups of India must...be achieved not on a mosaic pattern of isolated separate groups with only common economic and political interests, but on the basis of a quantum of common and shared values and traditions, although relating to distinctive cultural traits of the different groups.

Whenever we attempt to understand the composition of Indian society we find there are two poles - unity and diversity. It is not possible to ignore the unity of peoples within the bounds of nation-state while on the other hand, the vast array of communities with their language(s) and other attributes cannot also be denied. Often, even social scientists tend to view Indian society through the mirror of unity rather than through the observable and noticeable diversities of communities living within a nation-state. India's strength is in her diversity, in displaying her plurality; we see this diversity even in the adjustments/changes that each community makes to the changing times and situations and to the idea of nation-state. We need to appreciate and record this. We find in Dr. Guha's thoughts some reflection of this idea especially in his remarks on marginal groups in our country's mosaic of communities. Of course there can be many debates and arguments on the nature of integration and unity.

As a postscript, let me discuss a few other points. Dr. Guha's scholastic achievement is of eminence. He was Fellow of the National Institute of Sciences and of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. He presided over the anthropology section of the joint session of the Indian Science Congress and the British Association of the Advancement of Science held in Calcutta and served as Vice-president of the Section of Physical Anthropology and Racial Biology, International Congress of Anthropology, organised in Copenhagen in Denmark. He was known to be a good researcher and his research work bore an imprint

of thoroughness. In the academic field he was a stalwart. He was recipient of the Annandale Memorial Medal from the Asiatic Society of Bengal for his distinguished contribution in the field of anthropology. He was an able administrator. The government was aware of his capabilities. He was a government delegate to the first meeting of the International Congress of Anthropology, held in London. He represented India in almost all international meetings and conferences in anthropology and kept himself abreast of the most recent developments in the discipline. On his retirement, he reorganised the Bihar Tribal Research Institute in Ranchi. He was sincere, devoted and confident and worked hard to pursue his commitment in research and administration. He established the Indian Anthropological Institute in Calcutta. He excelled in his leadership role and could enthuse his colleagues to join him in his endeavour of building up a research organisation of repute.

Dr. Guha's work was topical in his time. *Racial Elements in the Population*, published Oxford University Press, 1944 is a seminal anthropological treatise giving an ethnic picture of India. Dr. D. P. Sinha writes in an obituary published in *American Anthropology*, April 1963:382-386 that Dr. Guha iterated in various professional meetings that theories could be built up only after collection of complete data and had a positive dislike for theoretical work based on insufficient data (ibid.:384). The obituary had an addendum by Carleton S. Coon (ibid.:386). Coon found during his time "Racial affinities of the peoples of India" in *Census of India*, J. H. Hutton (edited) 1931:1 as the only complete coverage of physical and cultural anthropology of the peoples of India and Pakistan. The traditional physical anthropological investigation through anthropometry, somatology, craniology, osteometry is not anymore in fashion. We are in the era of genetic studies. It is not that Dr. Guha was unaware of genetics (cf. "Race and nationality" in *Bulletin of the Bihar Tribal Research Institute*, Ranchi, March 1959, 1:1, 1-6), but tools, techniques and methods of the present day were not available in the 50's or 60's. Thus, it is very easy to discount the work in *Physical Anthropology* of that time. However, I am sure that the value of classifying a population on observable, measurable and noticeable traits will help recover the validity, significance and relevance of *Physical Anthropology* of yesteryears. We may need to have different parameters and create acceptable rules in keeping with contemporary knowledge. Sometimes simple arithmetic scores over complex calculus when the issue is one of keeping daily accounts but this is not to undermine the importance of one over another - I am sure that there is a place for genetics as there is space for more simpler analysis when studying the human face of the world. If Dr. Guha had been a university teacher may be he would have his gharana of sishyas. We who have worked in the AnSI are the ones to carry his torch forward.

We admit that in the light of contemporary academic interest Dr. Guha's work is no longer in fashion; we recognize that the studies created the base line for the evolution of modern studies. Modern anthropology was built on those early works that for various reasons we do not always acknowledge. The works of Dr. Guha had helped in the initial understanding of the vast diversity of our population; we may not agree with the parameters accepted earlier. In his time, Dr. Guha's scholarship was consistent with the studies being conducted all over the world and that is why we need to remember him for laying the scientific

foundation of the discipline of anthropology in India and inculcating the value of scientific procedures. He was comprehensive in his thinking and in formulating mega projects that enhanced the reputation of the Anthropological Survey making it quite unique in the world. It is this tradition of pan national studies that gives the AnSI the wherewithal to plan and execute mega projects with a view to comprehend the composite nature of Indian society with all its diversity.

I join with others in paying my homage to Dr. B.S. Guha.

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