

RE-PRESENTING THE PAST: THE DISCIPLINARY HISTORY OF INDIAN SOCIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

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The recent revival of interest in disciplinary history among Indian sociologists and anthropologists seems to be shared by scholars of different generations, political-theoretical orientations and regional-institutional affiliations. This diversity of appeal is itself an indication of the varied contemporary factors that have prompted a renewed engagement with the past.

The first and most immediate factor is the sense of a generational transition. The last years of the twentieth century have witnessed not only the passing of independent India's first generation of scholars (A.R. Desai, S.C. Dube, M.N. Srinivas...), but also the retirement of the second generation trained in the fifties and sixties (B.S. Baviskar, Andre Beteille, D.N. Dhanagare, T.N. Madan, Satish Saberwal, A.M. Shah, Yogendra Singh, J.P.S. Uberoi...). Both younger and older scholars are now aware that the discipline has a relatively long history, much of which exists only in personal rather than institutional memory.

Another obvious but also much more complex factor is the exemplary impact of the productive preoccupation with disciplinary history in the West. The recent establishment of disciplinary history as a significant research area in/on Anglo-American anthropology (reflected, for example, in the career of the HOA Newsletter and book series) has, at its most straightforward level, produced the desire for a similar history of the Indian discipline(s). Though we have several important personal reminiscences and scattered individual attempts to investigate the past, this is an area in which there has been very little knowledge-cumulation, with the same general terrain being covered again and again. It is no surprise, therefore, that a significant plurality of Indian scholars now feels the need to take up disciplinary history as a rigorous collective pursuit.

But disciplinary history – and that of Anglo-American anthropology in particular – did not attract attention merely because it was 'there', a virgin field awaiting cultivation. It acquired salience by asking important ethical-political, epistemological, and methodological questions that fundamentally affected the self-understanding of the discipline. Not only do these questions defy any simple transplantation into the Indian situation, but their own context-dependence is underlined when viewed from an eccentric vantage point like postcolonial India.

While the reciprocal relationship between anthropology and colonialism (or more generally, western dominance over non-western societies) is perhaps the single most important issue raised by/through disciplinary history, the dominant critiques of this relationship have been marked by a curious lack of interest in the practice of what might be called non-western instances of western-style disciplines. The western anthropologist visiting India has long been aware that, in addition to the usual 'natives', the Indian subcontinent contains not only his/her counterparts (practitioners of indigenous scholarly traditions) but also his/her *doubles*, that is, Indian scholars trained in the same western disciplinary traditions (often at the very same institutions) that he/she owes allegiance to. From as early as the 1930s, and most certainly since the 1950s, a small but significant set of Indian institutions and scholars have practiced western-style anthropology and sociology in India, and similar instances can probably be found elsewhere in the contemporary non-western world. But despite all the attention paid to the role of colonial power and domination in shaping ethnographic knowledge and authority, these instances of non-westerners practicing western anthropology have generally been ignored.

This is not to claim, of course, that such instances are worth studying merely because they exist, but to point out that they *ought* to have been of theoretical interest to western scholars investigating the role of racial-colonial dominance in the production of knowledge. To put it simply, they offered a convenient control case where the precise effect or importance of 'western-ness' could be examined: does the epistemological stance of (say) a Malinowski in the Trobriands differ from that of (say) a Srinivas studying Rampura, his own ancestral village? In a context where considerable attention was being devoted to 'dialogic' experimentation with the classic one-sided relationship between native informant and western anthropologist, Indian anthropology could have served as an interesting already-existing 'alternative' form. In the event, most historical investigations into western anthropology seem in this specific sense to have been somewhat parochial, being unwilling or unable to address the question of non-western anthropologies.

Though these questions have often been raised in India, they have not been pursued in any systematic or sustained fashion. One early form of the question was that of the desirability or efficacy of (so to speak) 'native' anthropology. Raised repeatedly in the early phase of M.N. Srinivas' career, this particular discussion never went much further than the comparison of the alleged advantages and disadvantages of the emic versus the etic view, and the assertion of the equal legitimacy and worth of the insider's perspective. Another form in which this question appears is that of the recurrent anxiety over the 'Indian-ness' of Indian sociology/anthropology. This is once again a debate that does not seem to have led anywhere: we have not yet been offered a detailed account of what precisely defines the 'western-ness' of anthropology as a discipline, and what aspects of Indian society or culture it fails to capture as a consequence. Conversely, despite the frequent calls to develop a specifically 'Indian' anthropology, we do not have a concrete sense of what this might look like, and what it will enable us to do that a 'non-Indian' version of the discipline does not.

If all history is in a general sense 'presentist', then the most important set of factors governing concern with disciplinary history are those that animate the contemporary moment. Considered from this perspective, what is happening in the west is of relatively little import, apart from suggestive examples or analogies. Much more relevant are the questions that Indian anthropologists and sociologists are asking themselves today, and the ways in which renewed attention to disciplinary history promises help in answering them. My own candidate questions include the re-positioning of colonialism, and contemporary forms of the power-knowledge nexus within and around the discipline

Now that the first half-century of the postcolonial era is over, we need to rethink the conceptual status of colonialism as category and causal explanation. What does it mean *today* to invoke the influence of colonialism on some social phenomenon or concept? For example, in the year 2001, it may be both perfectly accurate and utterly irrelevant to say that institutions like the Census and its interest in enumerating caste reflected the stake that the colonial regime had in portraying India as a hopelessly divided non-nation. The relevant question today is that of the particular *contemporary* interests the Census may wittingly or unwittingly be serving, whatever the origins of the institution. However, attention to the concrete historical processes through which such effects were produced in the past will no doubt be of assistance in evaluating similar (but different) linkages at work today; at the very least, history will help us establish preliminary ground rules for determining how disputes of evidence may be settled in relation to such questions. At a more general level, we need to explicitly recognize and build into our thinking the undeniable fact that today, whatever may be described as authentically 'Indian' inevitably includes a substantial western-colonial inheritance that over time has become part of our social reality, even though this does not mean that it is now impossible to distinguish between what is

Indian and what is not. Historically oriented scholarship can help us to document and track the changing meanings attributed to Indian-ness, so that we may be wary of the sleight of hand whereby contemporary categories are invested with anachronistic meanings, or are 'purged' of their empirical referents. (A good example here is the category 'hindu' which has recently been hijacked in this manner). Among the most crucial uses of disciplinary history is that it can help in tracking the changing relationship between state and academy in the colonial and especially the postcolonial period. This can help explain not only the waxing and waning of sub-disciplinary specialities but also the inter-relationships among different disciplines. Finally, rigorous disciplinary history can help us to address the vexed issue of the politics of location: the impact that regional, national and international positioning can have (as part of cross-cutting array of factors) on the circulation, power and influence of particular theories and theorists.

In short, we need to rethink our relationship to the past of our discipline from the vantage point of the present and its concerns. While I have been summarizing my own take on the 'big questions' that might animate such a history, it is important to emphasize once again that the current revival of interest in disciplinary history in India is motivated by diverse concerns and involves scholars with very different backgrounds and interests. A recent workshop held at the Institute of Economic Growth in Delhi during April 2000 provided a glimpse of the range of concerns behind the interest in disciplinary history. The three-day Workshop was attended by approximately 60-100 scholars including about 30 invited speakers from different regions of the country.

Though it is true that sociology and anthropology in India have been significantly shaped by theories and scholars of the west, local influences – theoretical, institutional, and national – have also played a major role in shaping the disciplines. It is this indigenous context – the nexus between knowledge, institutions and practices in the life of a particular discipline – which the Workshop focused on.

The IEG workshop made a good beginning in uncovering this history, locating the production of knowledge not just in theoretical paradigms, but as embodied in particular departments like that of the Lucknow or Baroda universities; impelled by associations like the Indian Sociological Society or the Anthropological Survey of India; and condensed in particular ways around particular personalities, like Ananthakrishna Iyer, Surajit Sinha, Christoph von Furer Haimendorf, G S Ghurye and A R Desai. Some of them, like Ghurye, are commonly recognised as being foundational to the discipline, while others like Sinha or Desai were thought worth studying since they stretched the discipline in new directions. Certain staples of the discipline(s), like caste, tribe, culture, the village community and modernisation were contextualised in the colonial and post-colonial contexts, looking at the tensions between high disciplinary tradition and the imperatives of nation-building, and the manner in which sociology or anthropology had resolved or failed to resolve these tensions. The workshop thus initiated a move towards a history and genealogy of these concepts as against studying them as transparent objects. It also raised awareness about the need to preserve institutional memory, since many ideas are shaped and sharpened (or destroyed and dulled) by the everyday interaction of colleagues and students, and what gets reflected in published work is only a small fraction of the intellectual life of academic institutions.

The workshop closed with an animated discussion on archives. During their presentations, several scholars had complained of the absence of 'data' such as field notes, diaries, etc, on which they could draw to build up a picture of an individual and construct a disciplinary history. Elements of such an archive, it was suggested, could include lecture notes, field notes, departmental syllabi, IAS examination syllabi, letters, diaries, interviews (both with

and about a scholar), journals (especially extinct ones), photographs, material artefacts collected during fieldwork, and so on. It was pointed out that M N Srinivas's original field notes were still extant and needed to be preserved, while, on the disheartening side, we learnt that S C Roy's original papers had disappeared. The idea of a newsletter to sustain the momentum of research on the history of the disciplines was also mooted, and again there was discussion on whether this should be (in whole or part) Internet based. [For a fuller account of the IEG Workshop, see Nandini Sundar, Satish Deshpande and Patricia Uberoi, 'Indian Sociology and Anthropology: Towards a History' in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 10-16, 2000, from which the previous two paragraphs have been taken. Also available on the EPW website (<http://www.epw.org.in>) in its Archives section]

One measure of the depth of interest in disciplinary history witnessed at the IEG Workshop is the number of outcomes it has produced. Pursuant to a unanimous resolution passed at the final session of the Workshop, a permanent Research Committee on disciplinary history has now been set up under the auspices of the Indian Sociological Society (under the more inclusive title of "Research Committee on the Sociology of Knowledge" at the suggestion of the Society). The Committee held its first meetings at the 26th Annual All-India Sociological Conference at Trivandrum in December 2000, and its next meeting to be held at the 27th AISC in Amritsar will be devoted to discussing college curricula in sociology and anthropology and questions of pedagogy. A collection of opinion pieces on institutional issues in Indian sociology/anthropology (revised versions of presentation made at the Workshop) has been published in the journal *Seminar* (No.495, November 2000). An edited volume of essays on founding figures in Indian sociology and anthropology is also under preparation.

[While this note draws on collaborative work with several colleagues, including Nandini Sundar, Patricia Uberoi and Satish Saberwal, I am solely responsible for the opinions expressed here.]

FOOTNOTES TO THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Glimpses of Impending Generational Change: A Franz Boas Miscellany

Searching my research files in the absence of submitted documentary materials for this number of HAN, I came across a folder labeled "Boas Letters—Am. Anthro. in the 30's." Although the five fading copies it contained were at first glance rather diverse, upon inspection they seemed perhaps to hang together on a thematic string: the responses of Franz Boas to generational changes in anthropology during the last decade of his own life, in a period of theoretical and institutional diversification. Well into his seventies, and no longer wielding so much disciplinary and institutional influence as he once had, even on those who had been his students (cf. Darnell 1990:319-32), Boas was encouraging of some changes, discouraging of others, and with mixed success. Although diverse in content, and reprinted here with minimal contextualization, the five letters that follow do suggest something of the range of Boas' concern, and the growing limitations of his ability to assert a coordinating influence over a range of institutional matters--funding decisions, editorial control, and departmental personnel--each of which, and all, collectively, suggested the direction of change in American anthropology in the years after his death in 1942

The first in the sequence was written by Boas on April 11, 1932, to Rev. John M. Cooper, Professor of Anthropology at the Catholic University of America, ethnographer of Native America, and secretary of the American Anthropological Association in the early 1930s: