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Anthropology and History in India

The encounter between anthropology and history in India started with one inestimable advantage. Unlike Europe and North America, where sociology and social anthropology have marked out distinct, non-overlapping domains (sociology studying 'us', the advanced West, and anthropology studying 'them', the Rest), in India the two disciplines have been virtually indistinguishable. This was brought about in part by the British training of M. N. Srinivas, the doyen of Indian sociologists (and anthropologists), brought up by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and E. E. Evans-Pritchard to believe that anthropology was a branch of comparative sociology. But it was also a gesture to the living reality of a country where nuclear power plants co-exist with hunter-gatherers, which boasts two of the oldest classical languages (Sanskrit and Tamil) but where almost half the population is illiterate. Srinivas' most distinguished students, Andre Beteille and Veena Das, have also viewed themselves as being both sociologists and social anthropologists. In their writing, teaching and empire-building, these three scholars have worked hard at removing barriers, theoretical as well as institutional, between the two disciplines.²

Set against this advantage are a host of factors that have worked to keep anthropology and history apart. They have been demarcated, first of all, by method; the historians work in the archive, while the sociologists and anthropologists are mandated by custom and their professors to do at least twelve months of field-work. They are also to be distinguished by their characteristic emphases, with historians focusing by and large on the domains of economics and politics, while sociologists and anthropologists study caste and community, religion and ritual. Most of all, though, it has been a temporal division that disunites them. For at midnight on 14th/15th August, 1947, India became independent. Nowhere is that momentous transition from colonial rule to independence more faithfully memorialized than in the university. In strict disciplinary terms, History ends on the 15th of August, 1947, and Anthropology takes over.

¹ This note is written from the perspective of a historian of colonial and contemporary India: writings on ancient and medieval India are outside its purview.

² I will follow this practice of treating sociology and social anthropology as one. Thus reference to one should be taken to mean the other as well.

The first signs of a rapprochement appeared in the year 1983, with the publication of two books that helped bring the two fields of force into fruitful interaction. D. N. Dhanagare's *Peasant Movements in India, c. 1920-50*, was the first work by a sociologist to make systematic use of archival materials in testing a theory — in this case, the Lenin/Mao/Eric Wolf thesis of the links between social class and popular rebellion. In the same year, Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* was published, the first work by a historian of modern India to creatively incorporate the concepts and findings of social anthropology. Unusually for a historian, Guha followed a thematic rather than chronological approach — structuring his accounts of insurgencies around a set of six 'elementary aspects' which united them — negation/ambiguity/modality/solidarity/transmission/territoriality.

The works of Dhanagare and Guha both exemplified a remark of the Indonesian scholar, Sartono Kardodirdjo. Writing in 1966 in the preface to his great work, *The Peasants' Revolt in Banten in 1866*, Sartono said that the one subject matter which certainly does exhibit the actual or potential interdependence of history and sociology is the social movement. Subsequent studies on social protest in modern India also furthered the dialogue between history and anthropology. These included David Hardiman's *The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Gujarat* (1987), a sensitive account of tribal religious movements, based on extensive archival as well as field research, and my own *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya* (1989), a study of a series of struggles for forest rights, from the late nineteenth century to the celebrated Chipko movement of our time. Most recently, two younger women scholars have completed monographs which likewise defy the sacred boundary dividing history from anthropology, by starting their narratives well before the 15th of August 1947 but coming down to the present time. Amita Baviskar's *In the Belly of the River: Adivasi Battles over 'Nature' in the Narmada Valley* (1995) takes a long view of the ongoing movement against the Narmada dam projects, seeing it against the backdrop of tribe—state relations as they have evolved over a century and more. Nandini Sundar's *Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar, 1840-1995* (in press), studies the question of 'divine kingship' in an isolated tribal region where rebellions have been targeted at states but not sovereigns.³

³ All the books mentioned here are published by Oxford University Press, New Delhi, with the exception of Sartono's book on Indonesia, published by Martinus Nijhoff in The Hague.

Six monographs in a decade might seem a fair harvest. And yet, the relationship between history and anthropology is not as creative as it might be. For one thing, it is heavily skewed in the direction of studies of social protest, with historical approaches invoked in explaining the occurrence of resistance (as an outcome of economic and political processes), and anthropological approaches used to explore its language, idiom, and symbolism. There has been little work as yet on the history of the 'everyday', where anthropological insights might be exploited in studying changes in family and kin networks, in forms of worship and sectarian association, or in lifestyle and patterns of settlement. Second, anthropologists and historians of India are following a worldwide trend in abandoning empirical research for the arid and, in the eyes of this writer, mostly unproductive field of discourse analysis. Agonizing over the tainted nature of the archive or the field, they have retreated into the analysis of printed texts and, increasingly, into autobiography. The descent into discourse (in India, more accurately rendered as a move from *dissent* into *discourse*) is something of an intellectual cop-out, a retreat from the hard grind of anthropological and historical research. But the moment has already persisted a good deal longer than academic fashions tend to do — it shows no signs of disappearing. That is a worry: as long as it lasts, the dialogue between history and anthropology will be restricted to the library and seminar room.