

Project Context: How anthropology shaped the relationship between state and society in India

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The project aims at a holistic and systematic attempt to historicize the connections between colonial ethnographers and the legacy of the colonial state, the impact of census on the modern understanding of caste, to the tensions of anthropological knowledge in India post 1947 around questions of decolonisation, development, national unity and 'modernity'



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The first of its kind, this project examines in a holistic and systematic way how anthropology shaped the relationship between state and society in India, and how it contributed to what we describe as India's 'intellectual decolonisation', ca. 1910-1970. The history of anthropology in India is largely underdeveloped. There are two reasons

for this. First, the attempts to historicise anthropology are relatively new. George W. Stocking Jr., considered a pioneer in the field, began to publish his writings in the late 1980s. Stocking (1987, 1992, and 1995) was largely interested in the founding figures of Western anthropologists such as Tylor, Boas and Malinowski. Not surprisingly, Stocking has little to offer about the growth of anthropology elsewhere in the South, let alone India. The second reason for the underdevelopment of the history of anthropology in India is the focus on the role of colonial ethnographers and the legacy of the colonial state. Works by Cohn (1996) and Dirks (2001) furthered our understanding of the role of colonial officials in what Dirks termed the 'ethnographic state', especially the impact of the census for the consolidation of our modern understanding of caste.

There are a few exceptions that challenged the focus on colonial ethnographers in the growth of anthropology in India. The earliest attempt was made by L.P. Vidyarthi in 1978. An anthropologist himself, Vidyarthi assembled two volumes on the most important works being done by Indian anthropologists during the twentieth century. While rich with interesting information, Vidyarthi's work is largely descriptive and very little analysis is offered. It was also written before the important work done on colonial anthropology, which changes how we position Indian intellectuals. Similarly, Uberoi et al (2007) co-edited a volume recovering the contributions of several important Indian scholars of the twentieth century. Yet, their book loses relevance by presenting the works of anthropologists in isolation rather than as a part of a larger process. More recently, C.J. Fuller (2016) and Simpson and Tilche (2016) have offered new perspectives on the subject. On his part, Fuller has offered a new vision of the works of colonial ethnographers by challenging the works of Dirks and Cohn. On their part, Simpson and Tilche have returned to the research sites of scholars such as F.G. Bailey, A.C. Mayer and David Pocock in the postcolonial state. Despite their fresh approach, the works by Fuller and Simpson and Jeffrey still focus on Western anthropologists. Thus a gap remains in our knowledge of the development of anthropology and sociology in India.

Unlike British ethnographies, designed to classify and rule the colonial 'Other', Indian intellectuals found in anthropology a way to understand themselves and the problems of their society. They used their discipline to contest ideologies of racial superiority and to reconstruct what they saw as 'Indian tradition'. This process was not easy.

A more thorough engagement with the lives and careers of Indian academics is necessary to reveal that the tensions of anthropological knowledge in India were not merely a European problem, nor were they resolved by independence. In fact, after 1947 these tensions were often exacerbated by new questions about decolonisation, development, national unity, and 'modernity'. We will explore the works and interventions of lesser known Indian scholars such as Rai Bahadur Hira Lal (1867-1934), who was instrumental in the survey of castes and tribes in Central India, as well

as renowned anthropologists such as L.K. Ananthakrishna Iyer (1861-1937), S.C. Roy (1871-1942), G.S. Ghurye (1893-1983), D.N. Majumdar (1903-1960) and S.C. Dube (1922-1996) among others. With this we will unveil the myriad challenges Indian social scientists faced with their disciplines.

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The legacy of these ideological battles is paramount. It may be found not only in the writings of these scholars but also in the institutions they left behind. Organisations such as the Anthropological Survey of India, the Indian Sociological Society, the Bombay Anthropological Society and the Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society for example, played a significant role in defining the new objects of study in Indian social sciences whether it was adivasis, dalits or denotified tribes. Often with strong links to the government, these institutions defined the main characteristics of Indian culture and discarded what they saw as foreign elements. The institutions also had strong connections abroad. Their staff collaborated with foreign organizations such as the Ford Foundation and UNESCO in village development programmes, and assisted in curating anthropological collections like the Museum of Man in Bhopal, India, and the Pitts Rivers Museum in Oxford. That is, the history of anthropology in India has strong political and international features. Aware of the complex nature of anthropology in India, this project will adopt a holistic approach that combines elements of intellectual, institutional and social history.