

INDIAN SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND ITS CAMBRIDGE CONNECTIONS

It is no more a matter of dispute that anthropology emerged a distinctive academic discipline at the beginning of colonial era. Its efforts in description and analysis were carried out by Europeans, for a European audience of non-European societies dominated by European power (Asad 1973:15). Similarly, much of the early anthropological works on India were conducted by the British scholar-administrators such as Henry Maine, Alfred Lyall, E.T. Dalton, Herbert Risley and a host of others. The first three modern Indian universities were established in 1857, the year a better part of India was already in revolt against the British rule. Though anthropology, or for that matter sociology, as an academic discipline to be taught and studied in Indian Universities, had to wait for as much as six decades, colonial administrators did not lose much time in using it as a tool in their favour. They employed anthropological methods and knowledge to look more closely at the Indian social structure and to construct a theory of Indian society. For example, administrators such as Alfred Lyall used ethnography and the comparative method to maintain difference rather than to create uniformity among India's political and religious groups (Cohen 1973).

Anthropology came to be taught at the Universities of London, Cambridge and Oxford, where candidates for the Indian Civil Service (ICS) were exposed to its expertise. John H. Hutton, W.G. Archer, Phillip Mason, J.P. Mills, who wrote monographs on the Indian themes, may be enumerated, among such administrators. Some of them such as T.C. Hodson and John H. Hutton were appointed to the faculty positions in Cambridge University after their superannuation. Hodson, an army officer, was assigned in Manipur and he wrote two monographs on Manipur. Similarly, John H. Hutton,

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a career bureaucrat, known for his monographs on the Angami (Hutton 1921a) and the Sema (Hutton 1921 b), held a number of important official assignments including Commissionership of the Census operation in 1931. But before Hodson and Hutton were employed at the Cambridge, W.H.R. Rivers, Professor of Psychology at Cambridge and author of the celebrated work on the Toda (1906), enjoyed immense reputation on the Indian scene. S.C. Roy, rightly claimed to be the father of Indian anthropology because of his classical monographs on Bihar tribes, was greatly encouraged by Rivers and his colleague, A.C.Haddon. In fact, Rivers was already appointed a professor in the Calcutta University after his retirement from Cambridge, an assignment which he could never take up because of his sudden demise.

Obviously the British influence was paramount on the emerging Indian social anthropology for historical reasons. With the introduction of sociology in the Bombay University and anthropology in the Calcutta University in 1920, some of the Indian graduates chose Cambridge for their higher studies (Majumdar 1968 : 173). G.S. Ghurye took his Ph D. degree under the guidance of Rivers at Cambridge in the Faculty of Anthropology in 1923. A year later, in June 1924, he was appointed head in the Department of Sociology, University of Bombay after Patrice Geddes' retirement (Ghurye 1968 : 152). K P. Chattopadhyaya, who was appointed to the professorial chair at Calcutta, was trained by Rivers and he took his M.Sc. degree in 1923 from Cambridge.

With the above two departments in two significant presidency towns of the British India, a beginning in sociological training, not far differently designed from social anthropological one, had been made. There were about half a dozen posts and only a few courses of study. With research funds almost non-existent, the individual researchers addressed themselves largely to the Indological topics. Srinivas (1986 : 33-34) has aptly summarized the Indian academic scene during 1910-1950 :

"Bombay was the only centre of postgraduate research in sociology (which included social anthropology) in the country. There were not more than half a dozen teaching posts in these two disciplines in the universities. The Antdopological Survey of India was the most important research organisation for anthropology, though much of the research carried out by it did not reach the interested public. It is not surprising that the two disciplines did not make an impact on the academic world... sociology and social anthropology suffered from certain other disabilities as well. As already mentioned, The association of

sociology with European as distinct from British and American academic traditions, made it suspect in the eyes of Indian academics, steeped as they thought they were in the traditions of Cambridge and Oxford. The British intellectual insularity was hugged by these men with an eagerness that was both comical and pathetic. If sociology was not respectable, anthropology was suspect as nationalist opinion regarded it as an instrument of colonial policy, either to create divisions among Indians or to keep large sections of them insulated from nationalist forces." (Srinivas *et al.* 1986 : 33-34).

II

John H. Hutton, C.I.E. (1885-1968) a member of the prestigious Indian Civil Service (1908-1938), started his career in the province of Eastern Bengal and Assam from 1909. He served as the Assistant Commissioner from 1912 to 1919 ; acted as the officiating Deputy Commissioner from 1920 to 1926 and was promoted to the rank of Deputy Commissioner in 1926. He worked as the Commissioner for the Indian Census, 1931, and also worked as the Chief Secretary of Assam province between 1935 and 1938. He was appointed as the professor of social anthropology in the Cambridge University in 1938 and retired from the chair in 1950. Besides his several 'notes' to the various agencies of the Government on the tribal affairs of the North Eastern Frontier region of India, he is known for his professional inaugural lecture at the Cambridge in February 1938, on 'Anthropology as an Imperial Study'.

Besides his normal administrative duties in Assam, he had succeeded P.R.T. Gurdon as the honorary director and editor of the volumes on the ethnography of Assam. He belonged to the then influential diffusionist school in British social anthropology. As per one of the dominant academic trends of his time, he believed that North East Frontier tribals of India were related more to the communities of the Far East and Melanesia. Jack Goody reminisced the days when Hodson and Hutton used to debate on kinship terms, spread of material culture and cultural traits of the Assam tribes during their long sessions in the department. However, with the emergence of structural functional school of social anthropology under A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and B. Malinowski, the Rivers-Hodson-Hutton brand of diffusionism was cast aside almost immediately.

Hutton, besides his famous monographs, was equally an authority on the caste system in India (Hutton 1946), an expertise which he developed during his tenure as Commissioner of the Indian Census, 1931. It appears that in the academic disciplines advancing rapidly in the 1930s and 40s, Hutton's

basically colonial ethnography was not acceptable. Even ethnographically closer allies and an old India hand such as Edmund Leach maintained a distance from him. However, for the emerging Indian social anthropology, Cambridge and Hutton continued to be significant entry points of recognition. During the Second World War and immediately after it Hutton had access to the very scarce available British resources pertaining to fellowships, positions and research funds. He was very much the most recognised authority on Indian anthropology. The new breed of scholars, who had graduated in 1940s, now looked to Hutton, the academic *bura-sahib* for all types of patronage. It was not only a colonial hang over but also due to his continued domineering presence in the field of Indian social anthropology and his links with the formal forums.

Hutton was an erudite scholar on tribal India (Hutton 1914). He held his own views on transformations of the village communities in Assam hills : "They (economic efficiency, development of individual behaviour etc) are results of the inevitable undermining of the village authorities, which must take place when administrative control is imposed from outside, as has been done every where by the British Government in Assam". He was consulted on formation of a sub-committee for endorsing the proposal for undertaking an ethnographic survey of Burma for which Dr L.F. Taylor was appointed.² Hutton was constantly in touch with fellow bureaucrats, who used to keep him posted with the changing political scene on the eve of the imminent transfer of power in India : "We are all taking an extremely pessimistic view of life here",³ informs Eric Lambert, Superintendent of Police, Nowgong in Assam.

Many young budding anthropologists in India respected Hutton and often confided in him about their problems as well as future plans of research. For example, Verrier Elwin, the missionary turned amateur anthropologist, confided in Hutton : "The Orissa Government has made me their Anthropologist for five years, but I fancy that the Congress (the Indian National Congress) people will turn me out or force me to resign, when they come into power. I have the (Somrao) Hivales with me and their children are great help in winning over the rather suspicious and timid Khonds. I have been working a good deal with Nicholson, the Conservator of Forests for Orissa.. on the problems of axe cultivation. We are planning three sanctuaries⁴ and this month I have been demarcating the sanctuary for the Kuttia Khonds. In these we want to eliminate all middle men, money lenders, landlords, missionaries, etc. and to give 20 acre of forests a household for axe-cultivation. It is going to be very difficult and I doubt if the Congress

will accept it.⁵ But the future is so gloomy that probably much greater difficulties and disasters will divert our minds. Guha (Dr. B.S., the then Director of the Anthropological Survey of India) is optimistic about the future of anthropology in India, because he believes that the intelligentsia of Bengal will take the lead. But I wonder. Grigson told me that you thought I was writing too much. My answer to that is : "After all what else have I got to do ? ..But I would be grateful if you would let me know if you think that I ought to rewrite my books before publishing them."⁶ (Hutton reported negatively on Elwin's *Maria Murder and Suicide* and *The Maria and the Ghotul* for the award of the degree of Doctor of Letters to the Oxford University).⁷

Hutton replied on April 27, 1946, to Elwin's above letters : "I was very glad indeed to hear that the Orissa Government had made you their Anthropologist. I wish it were for longer than five years but God knows what these 'Congress Wallas' (the Congress leaders or the Congressmen) will do. I thought they were friends of yours. Can't you pull ropes through the Servants of India (Poona) to get left there or have they cast you off for being an anthropologist ?"⁸

Guha, the newly appointed Director of the Anthropological Survey of India, wrote to Hutton from his camp office of Benaras Cantonment : "I am very grateful to the Col. Sewell for his help in getting the scheme (for establishment of the A.S.I.) through. It is very much in agreement with the suggestions made by you to Col. Sewell and consists of three main departments, namely, (a) Physical Anthropology including the skeletal remains of both pre-historic and present inhabitants of the country and Anthropometric studies of tribal and regional groups; (b) Human biology, emphasis on the applied aspects of Physical Anthropology including blood group studies, human heredity and studies on growth, and (c) Cultural anthropology comprising studies on arts and crafts of primitive peoples and the study of their social and religious institutions.

Dr. V. Elwin will be mainly in charge of cultural Anthropology (Elwin 1964 : 201-202) and I expect to get Aiyappan. On the Human Biology side we have appointed Dr. S.K. Basu, Assistant Professor of Anatomy, C.M. (Calcutta Medical) College, Calcutta. I am hoping to get (S.S.) Sarkar. . P.S. (d) a Physical branch for the study of the Psychological and Physiological reactions of their special aptitudes"⁹

Raymond Firth wrote to J.H Hutton¹⁰ from the London School of Economics requesting a recommendation for Ramkrishna Mukherjee, who

studied with L. Fitcher in Germany and later became Professor of Sociology at the Indian Statistical Institute, Calcutta : "Mr. R. Mukherjee, who is working on a study of 'Life and Labour in Six Villages of Bengal' (later published - Mukherjee 1958). I am of course only too glad to be of any assistance to any student you do approve before I do anything more in the matter." Hutton replied to Firth in his cold but calculated way : "Mr. Mukherjee is not really a student of mine at all, but a postgraduate physical anthropologist working on the Duckworth Research material here under Trevor. I approve of anything that you can do for him."¹¹

Evans-Pritchard¹² enquired of Hutton whether he could solicit a favourable response to M.N. Srinivas' application for a post in the Anthropological Survey of India : "I wonder if you would be kind enough to do something for M.N. Srinivas. . . He applied a long time ago for a post in the Anthropological Survey of India, and I think on your advice, wrote to Verrier Elwin about it. He has no reply. . . will you be so good as to write either to Elwin or Guha to find out. . ." It appears that Hutton did eventually enquire from Guha about the post and the latter replied to Hutton from Benaras :. . . "The post will soon be advertised. Mr. Srinivas should apply."¹³ It is reported that Srinivas did apply for the post and was not selected (Ghurye 1973 : 127). However, that was the time Srinivas sought Hutton's reference¹⁴ for a scholarship : "I have applied for the Homiman Scholarship I have chosen as my subject 'how caste works in an Indian village' (possibly 'Rampura' which later made a legendary name in village studies (Srinivas 1976). I think that it is time there was a field work account of the caste as it actually works in a village. Ten or fifteen years later such a study may be impossible."

In between, Chapekar's Ph.D. thesis, which had been approved by Prof. G.S. Ghurye but was rejected by Prof. D.N. Majumdar, was referred to Hutton, who too rejected it. This was the thesis on the Thakur community, which was later published as *Thakurs of Sahyadri*. S.C. Dube's thesis on the Kamar, submitted in the Nagpur University for the award of Ph D. was however approved and highly commended by Hutton.¹⁵ It is interesting to note that when Dube wrote to Hutton soliciting an article for the *Eastern Anthropologist*, the letter was responded to coldly. Guha too had sought Hutton's help in acquiring referee's reports on Prof. D.N. Majumdar's Ph.D. thesis submitted in the Department of Social Anthropology under the supervision of T.C. Hodson at Cambridge, as Majumdar was a candidate for some post in the Anthropological Survey of India. Hutton replied to Guha.¹⁶

"I am writing to say that the Board of Research Studies will not give me access to the referee's reports about Majumdar's thesis. He was admitted as a research student in the beginning of Michaelmas Term, 1933, and worked under Prof. Hodson's supervision. He submitted a dissertation entitled "A Changing Austric Culture" and was approved for the Ph.D. degree at the end of the Easter Term in 1935. I fancy his dissertation covers pretty well the ground and forms the basis of that book of his on the Hos..." (Majumdar 1950).

Narmadeshwar Prasad, who authored the *Myth of Caste System* (Prasad 1957) and the founder Head, Department of Sociology, Patna University, Patna, who was on a scholarship to the University of Columbia, U.S.A., for Master's degree in 1949 solicited Hutton's sponsorship for a research fellowship. Hutton replied rather curtly¹⁷ to Prasad:¹⁸ "If you wish to work for a Ph.D. in Cambridge, you should address yourself to the Secretary of the Board of Research Studies (University Registry, Old School). In any case, you could not work under me for more than one year as I expect to retire from my chair during the summer of 1950."

III

Edmund Leach argues that the sociology of the environment of social anthropologists has a bearing on the history of social anthropology: "...one thing I am quite certain. Unless we pay much closer attention than has been customary to the personal background of the authors of anthropological works, we shall miss out on most of what these are capable of telling us about the history of anthropology" (Leach 1984 : 22). Those were the days of 1940s, the post-world war years when young social scientists for want of jobs at home were looking for opportunities for studies abroad or similar such favours from their benefactors in England or elsewhere. The British Indian administrators were greatly at a loss because at last the Indian empire had almost slipped away from their hands. In this uncertain and confused situation the emerging Indian social anthropologists were trying hard to get support from the only source known to them. However, the source – the British – were not only unsure of themselves, but they also knew their limitations in the changed world power structure.

One sees the English missionary turned reformist-cum-amateur anthropologist, Elwin, exposing his inner world unintentionally. One finds pompous Guha, the recently appointed academic bureaucrat, looking for approval to his uncertain blue-prints. One also notes that Srinivas, Mukherjee, Majumdar, Dube, Narmadeshwar Prasad – all aspiring sociologists

and social anthropologists – the would be Mandarins – who were destined to steer through the Indian sociological establishment for at least three decades in post-1950 period — behaving in the same “comical and pathetic ways” for securing an approving nod from the Cambridge establishment. But at Cambridge the priorities had changed from Indian sub-continent to Africa. “Mayer Fortes took over a weak pre-functionalist department in Cambridge in 1950 and he set about its transformation with great energy.” (Kuper 1973 : 158). Not for nothing very few Indian social anthropologists turned to Cambridge in the post-1950 period.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author thankfully acknowledges the comments made on an earlier draft by Prof. D.N. Dhangare, University of Poona, Pune, Prof. T.N. Pandey, University of California, Santa Cruz, Prof. T.N. Madan, Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi and Prof. P.K. Mishra and Dr. V. Xaxa of North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.

NOTES

1. Prof J.H. Hutton's papers : Department of Social Anthropology (JHSA), Cambridge University, Cambridge, 143/WO7/8, dated March 25, 1945, P. Adams Esquare.
2. JHSA, *ibid.*, dated March 22, 1946.
3. JHSA, *ibid.*
4. Elwin wrote in his biography about two decades later : “My view on the protection of the tribes caused a regular flutter and for many years, indeed right upto the present time, I have been accused of wanting to keep them as they are to hold up their development, to preserve them as museum specimens for the benefit of anthropologist. This is, and always has been, nonsense. My suggestion in *The Baiga* was badly put and I should have realized the unfortunate connotations of the expression “National Park”. But in 1939, what on earth was one to do. It was not a question of preserving Baiga culture – for the Baigas had very little culture. It was a question of keeping them alive, saving them from oppression and exploitation, giving them a simple form of development” (Elwin 1964 : 290-291).
5. Writing about a decade later in 1957, Elwin wrote about Karanjia, the chosen Gond village in Madhya Pradesh : “We could hardly have chosen a less favourable place for the preservation of ‘museum specimens’ had that been really our intentions. . . our interest was entirely humanitarian.” (Elwin 1958 : XXIII).
6. JHSA, *ibid.*, V. Elwin to J.H. Hutton, March 21, 1945. See also Elwin (1964).
7. JHSA, 1946/WO 7/11.
8. JHSA, 143/WO 7/8, J.H. Hutton to Verrier Elwin, April 27, 1946.

9. JHHSAs, *ibid.*, B.S. Guha to J.H. Hutton, November 14, 1946.
10. JHHSAs, 144/WO7/9, from R. Firth to J.H. Hutton, December 3, 1946.
11. JHHSAs/*ibid.*/From J.H. Hutton to R. Firth, December 4, 1946.
12. JHHSAs/*ibid.*/From E.E. Evans-Pritchard to Prof. J.H. Hutton, Oxford, February 4, 1947.
13. JHHSAs/*ibid.*/From B.S. Guha, Benaras, Feb. 28, 1947.
14. JHHSAs/*ibid.*, from M.N. Srinivas to J.H. Hutton, Exeter College, Oxford, February 13, 1947.
15. JHHSAs/*ibid.*, JHH to S.C. Dube and enclosure - Bank Draft No. B 19453/27/28 dated 21.1.1948, Imperial Bank of India for £ 7-9-6.
16. JHHSAs/146/WO7/11 J.H. Hutton to B.S. Guha, November 9, 1949.
17. Some four decades after Hutton's response to Prasad, Edmund Leach writes on the prevalent temperament of the Cambridge academics : "...any history of British development in these (anthropology and psychology) fields needs to take into account not the overwhelming dominance and academic prestige of Oxford and Cambridge but also the conservatism and social arrogance of those who were effectively in control of these two institutions..." (Leach 1989 : 6).
18. JHHSAs/*ibid.*, J.H. Hutton to N. Prasad, Columbia University, U.S.A., April 20, 1949.

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