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Demystifying Some Ethnographic Texts on the Himalayas

Our thesis in this note is based on the assumption that as legatees of the colonial academic tradition, Indian anthropologists (and other human and social scientists) are home-grown Orientalists as they are caught up in the tyranny of the Orientalist discourse in which they were educated. They are Orientals in that they have been 'othered' in the discourse of the West about India; they are Orientalists in that they study and 'other' their objects of study—the subordinate (in this case, Himalayan) Orientals.

This dual facet of othering as well as being othered by the tyranny of an as yet unshakeable colonial discourse that has been unquestioningly internalized, we have called Home-grown Orientalism. In this sense, the work of Indian anthropologists in particular is largely eurocentric and is open to all the charges that can be brought against ethnocentrism of the West.

The idea of home-grown/native Orientalism may at first sight appear to be a contradiction in terms; for Orientalism necessarily presupposes the existence, the opposition of two worlds, two geographical areas (or mindscapes if you like): the privileged term Occident exploring/studying/reconstructing the object of its study, i.e., the Orient. What our thesis as a corollary to Said's in *Orientalism* (1978) sets out to claim is the further division of the Orient (in this case, India) in which the received dominant discourse of the West is assimilated without really challenging it; and continues to carry forward its hegemony in imposing the same values and weaknesses on their objects of inquiry which are thereby rendered marginal. In this era of decolonization, our quarrel is with that grid, that matrix of western imperial culture that continues to subsume our tastes and values.

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Some commendable efforts have been made lately to come to grips with related issues, but these attempts (the most important being the rise of the Subaltern Studies collective) lack (with the exception of Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak) the broad theoretical infusion of post-structuralist insights that Said brings to bear on his critique of Orientalism. We are not arguing for any wholesale importations of recent theories but only emphasizing the importance of learning from them in a manner that also keeps in view the danger of submitting to the lure of engaging in a hegemonic discourse of western theory.

What we proposed to do here is not to document or analyse the discourse of Indic Orientalism. Our purpose is something provisional and suggestive, something we hope, which will lead to more ambitious and comprehensive studies re-examining the passed-over and now dominant discourse ruling the human and social sciences. Rather, to invoke the notion of the Foucauldian *episteme* (1980) which in the first place produces these discourses. In the discourses on various ethnic groups, for instance, the episteme which presupposes the representational view of knowledge, of the subject always in control and in a position of transcendence over the object, deprivileges the knowledges that these groups have or can have about themselves (Inden 1986: 402).

An illustration from a recent ethnographic study is revealing. The very first page of R.N. Thakur's *Himalayan Lepchas* (1988) betrays the trappings of an indigenous Orientalism:

A knowledge of the races, tribes, and culture is a pre-requisite for an efficient administrative system and strategy of development (1988:1).

Apart from the ethnocentric flavour of colonial enterprise, there is no attempt here at distancing in the relationship between the scholar and the state. And there is no self-consciousness and resultant scrutiny concerning the methodology and praxis. The work thus suffers in its unresponsiveness to its material. The implication is the belief in 'the absurd theses that man plays no part in setting up both the material and the processes of knowledge' (Said 1978:300).

The failure here—as in all the texts dealt in this paper—is human as well as intellectual in that it stands in opposition to an area of the country (or ethnic space) it regards alien. The hegemony inherent in this Levi-Straussian binary opposition is vulnerable to the mildest form of Derridean deconstruction (1978). The project of orientalizing the Orient is repeated over and over in the orchestrated activity of tribal ethnography on the Himalayas. There are also examples galore in the book of what Said, quoting Anwar Abdel Malek, refers to as 'the hegemonism of possessing minorities' (1978:108).

Further, Chapter V entitled 'The Significant Three: The Lepchas, the Bhutias and the Nepalese' blatantly smacks of the British

imperial policy of 'divide and rule': Thakur does not find a single element of similarity between them so abundantly available (see Subba 1990. Chapter IV). There is also a definitive 'othering' of the non-Hindus when he says:

Contrary to the Hindu notion of 'Kanya Dan', brides among the Lepchas are sold away by the parents (78).

Notwithstanding the fact, which we ignore here, the ethnocentrism of the author is too clear to be excused. No culture or cultural trait that differs with the ethnographer's can be rational or meaningful: a la Orientalists. Yet another example of home-grown Orientalism in Thakur's book is found when he writes:

They are primitive. Their agricultural technology is primitive, level of literacy is very low and rate of population growth is extremely low (151).

Similar comments have been amply made about the Lepchas by the European Orientalists like A. Campbell, W.W. Hunter, and Dr. Graham over hundred years ago. And the counter-colonial literature referred to here bear testimony to the fact that colonialist literature on the Orient has always described it in similar language. Thus, if Thakur finds the Lepchas or their agricultural technology as 'primitive' it does not surprise us as his epistemological orientation has been very much orientalist and for scholars of his breed the Himalayan tribes are just a new Orient.

We next cite the example of *The Lepchas of West Bengal* (1978), which is an improvised version of *The Lepchas of Darjeeling District* (1962) published as a Special Series No. 1 of Cultural Research Institute, Calcutta. Like Thakur, Das writes in the very first page:

As a people, the Lepchas are extremely simple, amiable, cheerful, helpful, cooperative, careful and lack in spirit of conflict (1978:1).

This line is vividly reminiscent of the language of the European colonialists like Campbell, Hooker, Hunter, Dalton, and Mainwaring, to name only a few who have written about the Lepchas. They often sought the services of the Lepchas as 'servants', 'companions', and 'subjects' and rewarded them with epithets like 'amiable', 'cheerful', 'careful', and 'helpful'. Das describes them in similar terms not only because he has inherited the Orientalist mind-set (polished by G.P. Murdock of Pittsburgh University) but also because he belongs to the ruling 'race' in West Bengal. This is also clear from the very title of the book.

Hence, Said's contention that 'no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances' (1978:11) needs to be

emphasized. This need is felt more when we read the following lines of Das:

'Lanes and bye-lanes are hardly visible in the Lepcha villages' (40).

'No planned drainage system has developed in the villages but the hilly tract does not pose any drainage problem' (41). *Jhoras*, *Simsarmul* and *Manes* have been translated by him as 'waterfalls', 'water-logged areas' and 'Memorial Pillars' respectively (42).

Just as the Orientalist viewed the Orient as European or American first and as individuals second, Das also views the 'Lepchas of West Bengal' as a Calcuttan (if not a Bengali) first and as an anthropologist second. Otherwise, he would not look for lanes and bye-lanes or proper drainage system in the hill villages, whether inhabited by the Lepchas or not. Nor would he translate 'streams' as 'waterfalls', 'marshy lands' as 'water-logged areas', and Buddhist 'temples' as 'Memorial Pillars'. Again:

Their character structure along with their apathy towards hard manual labour and lack of competitive zeal for the betterment of life conditions are some of the major features responsible for their comparative inefficiency and less skilled manner towards agriculture (60).

It may be noted here that 'laziness', 'lack of competition', 'inefficiency', etc. are some of the resounding themes of the colonialist discourse not only on the Orient but also Africa. And with special reference to the Lepchas, there are scores of British administrators who have described the Lepchas in similar language. Happily, Pierre Clastres, a French political anthropologist, has ably exposed the hollowness of such a discourse in his classic book entitled *Society against the State* (1977).

Again, so typical of the colonial writers whose ethnocentrism was never to be missed, Das writes:

The Lepchas have very poor knowledge about the economic value of their activities. In many cases they are found to act irrationally (76).

This is a fine example of what Michel Foucault has called 'subjugated knowledge' which he defines as 'a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity' (1980:82). Or what Paul Roth calls the 'attribution of rationality' as an Orientalist way of looking at the 'Other' (1989:555).

Despite the rapid growth of counter-colonial literature in the West as well as in India, the latest addition to the ethnography of the

Himalayas, viz., *Ecology, Culture and Change: Tribals of Sikkim Himalayas* (1989) by Veena Bhasin of Delhi University is blissfully ignorant of the same and gleefully follows the footsteps of Das and Thakur. This in itself speaks of the strength of the colonialist discourse which has penetrated into the very system and method of ethnographic exercises by Indians. Colonialist discourse, hook, line and sinker:

This report . . . brings to the reader a representation of an archaic culture in an intact state that lies wholly outside of Hindu culture and ideology and that is different and distinct in many ways from the peasant economies of India (26).

Clear here is the Orientalist dogma that '(t)hey cannot represent themselves; they must be represented' (Marx 1977:478-79). Nothing can redeem her for 'disregarding, essentializing, denuding the humanity of another culture, people, or geographical region' (Said 1978:108). Further, she 'views the Orient (here, Himalayan tribes) as something whose existence is not only displayed but has remained fixed in time and space' as if they were fixed in a museum until India (whom she represents) owned them or adopted them in 1975.

There is also, as in Thakur's book, a clear 'othering' of the non-caste or non-Hindu culture and ideology. It is well known that the Orientalists have always treated 'caste' and 'Hinduism' as the crux of the Indological discourse (Inden 1986:401-03). Bhasin, a loyal adherent of this discourse, seeks the same bases in non-Hindu, non-caste, trans-societies of North Sikkim:

In multi-ethnic villages, the interrelational pattern is expressed mainly in commensal behaviour, that is, what a person can eat or drink, where and what he can give or take from whom (51).

She even talks about seating arrangements based on purity and pollution. This is probably the limit of stretching Indological discourse to high altitude tribal areas of Sikkim which itself was acquired by India only fifteen years back. Her idea seems that even the Lepcha-Bhutia must fit in the caste-framework because they are Indians. She has actualized her idea by placing these tribes in the fifth stratum, above only the 'untouchables' (p.54). In the entire book, North Sikkim stands for her as a new-found Orient.

One final example: 'The Lepchas practise subsistence agriculture' (p.56). But as Clastres says:

If one gives a meaning to words, if by subsistence economy one is not content to understand an economy without a market and without a surplus—which would be a simple truism, the assertion of difference—then one is actually affirming that this type of economy permits the society it sustains to merely subsist; one is affirming

that this society continually calls upon the totality of its productive forces to supply its members with the minimum necessary for subsistence (1977:162).

The economy of tribal societies elsewhere has often been subjected to similar ethnocentric narrative as Bhasin displays in her book.

Hence we can safely conclude that most anthropologists in India have not been able to shed off the colonial mind-set they have inherited. Home-grown Orientalism still rules the discipline because, we argue, power comes from the act (conscious or otherwise) of Europeanizing or Americanizing which means partaking of the intellectual loot of the West and thus gaining legitimacy in the East. They have, willingly or unwillingly imported lock, stock and barrel the active western mind-set to see the subordinate cultures in their own country. To them, the challenge thrown by the Subaltern Studies collective are confined to the historical domain and do not pertain to anthropology.

It is this submission to the Orientalist method and system of thinking and studying alien cultures, which is probably responsible for the present stagnation in anthropology. Anthropology has even become an anathema to many who have begun to identify themselves as sociologists instead of anthropologists. Though the distinction between the two is difficult to make either with regard to scope or quality of research particularly in India, the desire to call themselves 'sociologists' is not because of its 'glamour' as some would hold but because of the stigma of colonialism which anthropologists have not grown ashamed of as yet. But since deriving from the Orientalists has taken place at the level of episteme and the mind-set, disciplinary switch-overs make little difference. The sociologists, as much as the geographers and historians, have proved themselves no different from the anthropologists as far as their episteme and mind-set are concerned.

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