

Anthropology in India and Anthropological Journals in India

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VRD: Nilika, you are the current Editor of *Indian Anthropologist*. If you look at issues published in the last 10 years, what would you say are the leading issues or topics you and your colleagues work on? And is it different if you look at other anthropology journals from India and abroad including *Contributions to Indian Sociology*?

NM: In Indian Anthropology the leading issues that have appeared in *Indian Anthropologist* are in the fields of Indigenous issues, Development studies, Public Health, Environmental issues, Urban and gender studies. There are competing journals like *Sociological Bulletin*, *The Eastern Anthropologist*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, *Social Change* and some others where in addition to these economic and political subjects like poverty, labour, protest and movements, Dalit (caste issues) and minorities (Muslim), issues of governance and public policy find place. I largely work on Gender and disability issues. On the latter very few publications appear in the journals.

VRD: If you look at the earliest issues of *Indian Anthropologist*, do the issues your predecessors published at that time resonate very much with what you are doing today? In other words, what has changed, if anything, in the journal?

NM: A closer examination of the earlier volumes of *Indian Anthropologist* (IA), which ran in its 50th volume in 2020, reveals that a lot has changed. Right from the beginning IA endeavored to publish papers from 3 major sub-branches of anthropology i.e. social/cultural anthropology, physical/biological anthropology and pre-history/archaeology. In the early days, many articles were published on themes in social anthropology in 70s. In the 80s and early 90s, there were larger numbers of contributions from physical/biological anthropologists. From mid 90s onwards, social anthropologists and sociologists have published more articles in the journal. Contributions from pre-historic archaeologists have been very few and those are primarily symbolic in nature.

Since I got associated with *Indian Anthropologist* from early 2000, one saw an increasing emphasis on topics of inter-disciplinary interests and many thematic issues have been published like 'Women and HIV/AIDS,' 'Folk narratives,' 'Health policies,' 'Everyday state,' 'Public policy,' Urban Ecology, 'Methodological Issues in Disability Research,' 'Transformation in theories,' etc. One of the important changes is the increasing number of publications from younger scholars working in anthropology and allied fields while it was the reverse in the early years of the journal, when senior anthropologists published in its pages. *Indian Anthropologist* has a global as well as national reach today due to its being hosted by JSTOR in comparison to the past, when it was largely consumed locally within anthropology academia.

VRD: Are there other anthropological journals in India? Do they have different interests and preferences?

NM: There are many other anthropology journals. The oldest being *Man in India* (MI), established in 1921 by Rai Bahadur Sarat Chandra Roy at, Ranchi, Central India, *The Eastern Anthropologist* (EA), established in 1947 by D. N. Majumdar at Lucknow, North India, and the *Journal of Indian Anthropological Society* (JIAS) established in 1966 at Kolkata, Eastern India. They along with IA have been running without any break for several decades. Many other anthropology journals started in earlier decades; however, they could not sustain their continuity. Some new have also started.

VRD: Do they face challenges that are particular to them or that you all face?

NM: The major challenges before most of the journals have been both financial and human personnel. Except *Man in India*, which was started by one of the first professional anthropologist in India, Rai Bahadur Sarat Chandra Roy, other journals have been organs of anthropological associations that are voluntary in nature, being groups of professional anthropologists. In the absence of any state patronage or private funding, the journals have struggled to stay afloat on the basis of lifetime membership fees, subscriptions and meager sales. Some years ago, EA has been taken over by one private publisher and their financial condition has improved. In the recent past, publishing houses of the stature of Sage Publications wanted to take over IA, but their conditions were not acceptable to the Indian Anthropological Association. One of the major points of conflict of interest was the publishing house's refusal to provide hard copies to the life members. The second problem before many journals has been lack of commitment to voluntary editorial responsibility. In the case of the above-mentioned journals, the editorial teams have committed their valuable time and energy to keeping the journals afloat.

One of the major challenges faced by anthropology journals today is the scarcity of good research and language issues. Barring few instances, the declining standards of research and poor training in English language are some of the major challenges we face today. Another challenge is authors, reluctance and sometimes refusal to revise the paper after receiving critical peer reviews. Many authors, especially the senior colleagues, do not want to be subjected to criticism, and that is perhaps the reason why we receive fewer papers from senior scholars.

VRD: Do you all publish in English? And is the language of publication something that is taken for granted by anthropologists in India? Is this just an example of neocolonialism or the legacy of colonialism in India?

NM: The above-mentioned journals are in English and, yes, it is true that owing to the continued legacy of colonial practices in education, English has become the de-facto medium of communication in higher educational settings; anthropology is no exception to that. In north India, however, the Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society that brings out the EA also brings out a journal, *Manav* in 'Hindi', the lingua franca of India. Beside this at different points of time, some anthropology journals appeared in 'Bangla' in eastern India and south Indian languages but they have not been able to sustain their presence in academia. In some state universities a few journals have been published in vernacular languages but many have not been able to sustain themselves. Since anthropology is taught in very few departments (47), English is predominantly the medium of instruction. It is different in other fields. Subjects like political science, history, and sociology are being taught in vernacular mediums. As mentioned above, though anthropology is preeminently taught in English, very poor quality of writing is evidenced owing to poor training in English at the school level.

VRD: India has an enormous population in general, and many academics, but am I wrong in thinking that it still has a small population of anthropologists (of any sort)?

SMP: I think you are right, India has very few anthropologists in comparison to academicians from other subjects. There are many reasons for this, first being that anthropology is a relatively new subject, which started only in the early part of the 20th century as a professional discipline in a few universities in India. Its association with colonialism and its implications for the nature of shaping the subject have something to do with it not being visible in the public sphere. Though the contemporary Indian anthropology has pitched itself on many unconventional places, the association of anthropology in India with the study of tribes has been still continuing. There are many anthropologists who continue to work with the tribes and indigenous communities. Tribes have been one of the most excluded populations who never got their due in Indian polity, economy and society. Anthropology as a subject has low visibility also in terms of career prospects for students since it is also not taught at the school level. It is not a popular subject in universities, but it is preferred a lot by civil services aspirants. In recent decades, people with anthropological training have been finding placement in the development sector. The ethnographic methodology has been utilised by other subject specialists who fail to give due acknowledgement to anthropology. One important reason for anthropology's modest profile is also the fast emerging popularity of sociology, which is taught at school and college level in all parts of the country. Education policy matters have confined anthropology to areas dominated by tribal populations thinking that the anthropologist could mainly provide expertise on the population. This stereotyping and neglect have caused anthropology to pay a high price.

VRD: Are there enough positions in universities, colleges, NGOs, and government agencies for graduates of universities in anthropology? Do most anthropologists in India teach and do research?

NM: Since there are very few departments of anthropology in India, only a few graduates get to enter academia (departments and colleges). There are more anthropologists serving in the public universities and colleges in eastern India and now some private universities have also opened their doors to anthropologists. In addition to this, Anthropological Survey of India, an organization of the Government of India has been recruiting anthropology graduates at different levels. Many biological anthropology graduates have worked in medical and public health institutions including the Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR),

another public sector institution. There are some social science research institutes aided by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) where anthropologists have found work. Further, in recent decades anthropologists have joined the development sector working in both local and international NGOs. Some also work in the corporate sector in advertising, Human Resources, research and marketing divisions.

SMP: Anthropologists have also been finding jobs in various fields outside academia. After independence, anthropologists were recruited on the international borders of north east India as members of the Indian Frontier Administrative Service (IFAS) which came up in 1954 as a part of the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's policy on North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA) which he developed in collaboration with Verrier Elwin, a very important missionary turned anthropologist. The idea was to win over the hearts and minds of frontier people with sensitivity, care and friendliness using the presumably expert knowledge of anthropology. Officers were specifically selected and trained on the basis of how popular they were with the local tribes. The IFAS officers were given freedom to act as deemed necessary, somewhat similar to a kind of autonomy, which Sol Tax visualized for action anthropologists in 1958. However, this service was discontinued in 1968 due to stagnation and taking over of many of its services by the Indian Army especially by the Border Roads Organizations (BRO).

Currently anthropology has been a very popular optional course in the coveted civil services examinations conducted by the Union Public Service Commission and the top bracket students join the prestigious Indian Administrative Service (IAS).

Anthropologists also find placements in museums, office of Registrar General, Census Operation, and forensic laboratories. As NM mentioned earlier, anthropologists are finding jobs in the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industries (FICCI), where anthropological skills are used in business and corporate houses, especially in the field of marketing, branding and big ticket purchasing.

VRD: There was a time not that long ago when the Indian government frowned on foreign anthropologists coming to India to do fieldwork. In fact, I know people who put down that they were sociologists in order to get research visas.

NM: As mentioned earlier, people working on politically sensitive areas might find it difficult to get a research visa. However, in my association with many anthropologists, I did not see any particular reason for them not getting a visa. I have been on Fulbright foundation committees where I did not find any reservation being expressed by the committee. Rather I found large number of US students exploring anthropological themes coming to India for field research.

SMP: Even I also feel so. Maybe some foreign anthropologists found it easy to get a visa as sociologists, but to the best of my knowledge such distinctions do not exist at the level of issuance of Indian visas. You may be referring to a specific case where the scholar's academic training or country of origin or the route of travel could be a concern for the visa office, but not as a general rule discriminating the anthropologists.

VRD: I have happily worked with young Indians who have come to the U.S. to do their doctoral work, and I have found them quite good, but I worry that there is some form of *brain drain* in India and that some of your best students get pressured to get their doctorates in the U.S., the U.K., Canada, and perhaps Australia. Can't good students today get excellent doctoral training in anthropology in India? Is it a matter of prestige, or habit, or something else altogether?

NM: Since the eighties there has been a popular trend where students from India have been going to the USA to take degrees in anthropology and many have also settled in faculty positions there. I clearly see an Indian-American diaspora pretty visible in American anthropology today. To me it appears as a phenomenon of status mobility, a new kind of elite formation in India. Those were largely children of elite, upper caste/class families of India who did not see any value in being educated in Indian public universities. They were chasing the 'American dream' in the pursuit of money, power and prestige. Professor Andre Beteille, the eminent sociologist from India, once explained to me in a personal conversation that the aspirational middle class of India is trying to maintain higher status and prestige by sending their children abroad for studies, and this is a new kind of inequality emergent from the 80s and the 90s. On the other hand, it is also true that there has been a systematic decline in the standard of education in the public universities of India barring the University of Delhi, Jawaharlal Nehru university, University of Hyderabad and a few others where the training of anthropology is comparable to the best of the world. In recent years I have also noticed that people trained in anthropology from foreign universities are being recruited by the private universities.

SMP: Having a degree from abroad is definitely a status symbol and a matter of prestige. Many rich parents send their daughters to the UK for a one year Master' degree program spending a minimum of nearly 40,000 USD. Many a time it leads to an academic branding, and sometimes it enhances their marriage prospects. This is how the upper caste/class contribute to elite formation and maintenance. Bright students in physical and natural sciences aspiring for a degree from a Western university have gone abroad and become a kind of academic habit in post-independence India. Social Sciences have been following this trend of late.

This need for branding has caused implicit pressure on young minds to go abroad in pursuance of higher studies. They come up with excellent ethnographies, innovative and socially responsive topics that are theoretically rich and empirically grounded. Some of them return to India, but the *brain drain* starts when others compete for tenure track positions in US universities and settle down there. Some of the reasons for settling down there is the work culture, professional rigor and ethics, commitment to quality and excellence which are difficult to find in other places.

VRD: Is there a class, region, language, religion, or caste factor in India both when it comes to who becomes an anthropologist there, and who gets studied there? I think there is something like that in many countries, including the U.S.

NM: Though there are no systematic studies on this subject, a cursory glance reveals that for a long time, upper caste, middle class members of Indian society chose to study and practice anthropology. It is interesting to see larger number of anthropologists coming from most educated states of India (i.e. Kerala and Bengal), Bombay (western India, Maharashtra). Today Bengali anthropologists along with Odia colleagues (anthropologists from Odisha) seem to dominate the diaspora and the local set ups in north India. Large number of Punjabi and Hindi-speaking anthropologists also came from Delhi, Lucknow and Chandigarh (North India). It was largely a male-dominated discipline with very few women being trained there. But today a change is clearly visible; women constitute almost 80% of the student population and 50% of the faculty due to social change. Many individuals from the marginalised categories like Dalit (the so-called 'lower caste'), ST (scheduled tribe) and Muslims have also joined the discipline primarily due to India's reservation policy. There are a large number of anthropologists in India today who are doing interesting ethnographic research on their communities. The rise of this new breed of anthropologists has dissolved the distinction between us and them. Most of the early anthropologists worked on communities who were unequal in status with them but this has also been challenged.

SMP: I agree that factors like caste, class, region, language and religion influence two things, (i) who comes to anthropology and (ii) what is being studied. I will talk about the regional manifestation of the discipline in different parts of India with reference to its specialization. In north India, Panjab University of Chandigarh has emerged as the premier center for cutting edge research in physical/biological anthropology with specialization in paleoanthropology, paleoecology, forensic anthropology and human growth and development. This has influenced the department at Delhi, which has followed this path in biological anthropology but not so successfully as the Chandigarh department. Universities in northeast India including Guwahati are marked with a stronger presence of prehistoric archaeology (a specialization within anthropology). Shades of this are also evident in Calcutta and Utkal University on India's East Coast. In south India, Central University of Hyderabad has emerged as the premier center of social anthropology producing high quality research in the fields of medical anthropology, ecology, natural resource management, development studies and urban anthropology. Indian universities in central India focus on the study of indigenous communities and culture studies. However, there are overlappings across the regions but a broader picture points towards such a mapping of the subfields of anthropology or what is being studied across the regions.

VRD: Most anthropologists I know in various countries describe themselves as progressive, liberal, secular, socialist, or Marxist. Also, many anthropologists I know in various countries are critical of their state authorities and government officials. What is the scenario in India?

NM: Many anthropologists in India would like to describe themselves as liberals, socialist and secular. Though I also feel that many today might also support the right-wing policies of the government. In India, anthropologists in the past have worked closely with India's policy makers and bureaucrats. They have been critical of public policies and their implementation, irrespective of the nature of the political parties ruling the government, though it is also true that there are very few public intellectuals from anthropology who have taken a clear position *vis a vis* government policies

SMP: There is, however, another category of anthropologists who are currently trying to derive inspiration from Indian civilization and not necessarily from an exclusive Hindu majoritarian perspective. In other words, vedantic philosophies have started providing the point of departure for developing a new kind of Indian anthropology. They are being taken as important sources of logic and its perusal for knowing the world, both material and non-material, so that the ultimate truth is revealed.

In most of cases, anthropological work in India tries to escape from situating the phenomena within the ambit of the State. While physical/biological anthropologists have conveniently ignored the presence of the State, the social anthropologists in provincial universities have fashionably taken up the role of providing unsolicited recommendations to the State, as a colonial hangover. Anthropologists are largely dealing with the issues of development policy and practice, public health, women's empowerment, tourism, NGOs and disaster management.

VRD: Is there any intellectual or scholarly interchange among anthropologists in the subcontinent, or is that simply impossible given current (and longstanding) issues since the partition? For example, are there Pakistani anthropologists doing fieldwork in India, or Indian anthropologists doing fieldwork in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka or the Maldives?

NM: There have been very clear scholarly exchanges among the anthropologists in the sub-continent. Students have been coming to India to study anthropology from Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan and even Afghanistan. With Pakistan, however, things have been uneven. I remember at JNU, we used to receive Pakistani students some years back but no longer due to visa issues. Delhi also has a 'South Asian University' where there are sociologists and social anthropologists working together in the department of sociology. They have also brought out a good number of publications on their work together. I do not remember working with any scholar or student from the Maldives. It may be difficult to point out the reasons for this, though some students might be going to south India. India is a huge country with so much diversity that it is difficult to generalize. Many scholars have worked with those from south Asian countries especially feminists and those working on human rights.

SMP: The intellectual and scholarly interchange among anthropologists in the subcontinent may not be significant, but it is noticeable. The University of Delhi has been attracting students from Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka for their doctoral research. But they prefer to do fieldwork in their own countries. I know one Pakistani scholar, Sheba Saeed, who has done her doctoral research among beggars in Mumbai. It was in anthropology of law and she was a student at a university in the United Kingdom.

Currently I have a doctoral student who is an assistant professor of anthropology at a public university in Bangladesh. I also have done extensive fieldwork in Sri Lanka and Nepal in the fields of disaster management, sustainable ecology, economic literacy and downward accountability. However, a south Asian platform is much needed for providing the anthropologists of the subcontinent with the intellectual and scholarly exchange needed in promoting cross boundary work.

VRD: Are there non-Muslim anthropologists in India who work on Islam itself or Muslim communities in India? And how about Muslim anthropologists in India working on Hinduism or Hindu communities in India? I ask because I recall a former colleague from India telling me that he was very liberal and open-minded, except when it came to Islam.

NM: There have been a few non-Muslim anthropologists in India who have worked on Islam and also on Muslim communities (e.g. Deepak Mehta, Ragini Sahay and Anusua Chatterjee). Some have also worked on the aftermath of communal riots in the past three decades in Bombay, Gujarat and elsewhere, like Roma Chatterjee, Deepak Mehta and Rowena Robinson. Today there are large number of Muslim anthropologists working on Muslim communities, as they want to bring out an insider's perspective. There is a raging debate between the left and the right in academia on the Hindu-Muslim question since the 70s. I remember T. N. Madan's paper on religious ideologies in a plural society among Hindus and Muslims of Kashmir, a contribution which appeared in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* in the early 1970s and later on his comprehensive edited work on Muslim Communities in South Asia (2001). His *Explorations in Anthropology of Islam* (2006) is also a significant contribution.

SMP: There are many Muslim anthropologists in India who have been working on topics of anthropological relevance other than Islam or Muslim communities. I shall refer to two such prominent anthropologists here. Sekh Rahim Mondal, formerly Head of Anthropology Department and Director, Himalayan Study Centre at North Bengal University have worked extensively on Himalayan communities belonging to all religions on the international borders of Bhutan and Myanmar. His doctoral work at Calcutta University, in the early 1980s, was a comparative account of Hindu and Muslim villages in the industrial belt of west Bengal.

Another anthropologist, Nadeem Hasnain, formerly Head of the Anthropology Department and Executive Editor *The Eastern Anthropologist* at the University of Lucknow also worked on non-Muslim tribal communities in different parts of India. His recent work on 'the other side of Lucknow', a classic in urban anthropology and culture studies is an inclusive ethnographic account elucidating the changing dimensions of city life. Hasnain's work on the changing status of other backward communities of India and bonded labour is about non-Muslim communities.

In addition to these, there are non-Muslim anthropologists who have worked on Muslim communities. Ranjit Bhattacharya, formerly Director of the Anthropological Survey of India worked on Moslems of Birbhum district of rural Bengal for his doctoral thesis under the supervision of Surajit Sinha in the early 1980s from Calcutta University. It was a study on social stratification and sociocultural boundary maintenance. Surajit Sinha was a student of Nirmal Kumar Bose, anthropologist turned freedom fighter and a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi. Both of them preferred the term 'moslem'-- an anglicized version of the word 'muslim'.

Kumkum Srivastava, a historian turned anthropologist, worked on the Kalandars, an antinomian Sufi sect with special reference to two shrines located in Delhi and Panipat in Haryana in North India. It was a work in historical anthropology combining first-hand fieldwork with the study of historical documents to explore the mystical Islamic beliefs and practices. This was her doctoral dissertation, which she did under my research supervision at the University of Delhi in the early 2000.'s

VRD: Soumendra, you took on a big administrative role recently, and you spearheaded bringing the 2023 IUAES Congress to India. Did that job and that initiative lead to attacks on you by fellow Indian anthropologists, or were they supportive?

SMP: Yes, recently I completed my tenure (2017-2020) as Vice Chancellor, Utkal University, a NAAC A+ and Category -I university in Odisha on India's east coast. Beginning in 1999, for nearly two decades the university was witnessing a lot of violence due to the presence of outsiders on campus having a vested interest in local polity and economy. Violence was rampant and so much entrenched into the everyday life of the campus that it was almost normalised. People took violence of any magnitude as a part of everyday campus life. As an administrator, instead of using coercion to discipline the recalcitrant students, I chose the Gandhian method of non-violence, persuading and counseling the students not to indulge in violence. Even I had to sit on a silent introspective day long fast to bring students' aggression under control. It was fulfilling to see that in the 150th year of the birth of Mahatma Gandhi, we could install his life size statue in front of the central library at a newly created amphitheater, *Ahimsa Sthal*, the citadel of non-violence as a perpetual reminder to the younger minds that violence leads to a blind lane.

The coming of the 19th IUAES-WAU World Anthropology Congress 2023 on the theme *Marginalities, Uncertainties and World Anthropologies: Enlivening the Past and Envisioning the Future* from 14 to 20 October 2023 is a historic event. This is coming to India after 45 years, the last one being in 1978 when L. P. Vidyarthi, the then President of the Indian Anthropological Association (IAA) was the main organizer. In 2018, IAA along with other collaborators won the bid and the much-awaited world congress came to India. However, after the Executive Committee of IUAES' unanimous decision to withdraw its collaboration from one of the partners, the problem began. Since then, I have been at the receiving end. Unsubstantiated criticism, baseless allegations and narrow parochial considerations and disciplinary fundamentalism have been the main source of such tendencies. However, my anthropological lessons on tolerance, non-violence and let it go approach have been very instrumental in sailing through the crisis. Most of the Indian anthropologists with a cosmopolitan outlook and an interdisciplinary orientation supported our stand and those with vested interests have distanced themselves from us. I have always believed that 'World Anthropology Congress' has to be inclusive of divergent

views and opinions and, as organizers of this mega event, we have kept our house open to all kinds of intellectual currents especially the indigenous voices. Many senior anthropologists through their well-researched work have supported our stand on this. The composition of our National Organizing Committee clearly reflects this.

VRD: Soumendra: the coming of the World Congress to India is a big event. Will it lead to any academic churning in this subcontinent? Will it be different from the earlier ones?

SMP: The 2023 Congress is a momentous occasion in the history of World Anthropology because for the first time it is being organized by IUAES under the umbrella structure of the World Anthropology Union (WAU), an important milestone in synergizing the many voices of one discipline on a global platform. This time the forthcoming World Congress has created an unprecedented response from different parts of the globe shaping a responsible and responsive World Anthropology.

Therefore, instead of taking it in a routinized way of organizing a conference, innovative academic events have been planned to create pathways for an anthropology of the future in terms of grooming the future leaders, connecting with civil society institutions, media houses and policy makers-- providing them a global platform for cross cultural exchange of ideas, the creation of transnational networks and the fostering of sustainable international linkages in different regions of the world, including the global south. Efforts are being made to reach out to the south Asian colleagues in this context.

In the IUAES-WAU Internship Program, especially designed for this World Congress, the young anthropologists will be groomed under the academic guidance of international mentors beginning in January 2022. Several Pre-Congress activities have been planned out in terms of Workshops, Webinars and Online conferences spreading over these two years to create an atmosphere of preparedness not only to optimize the Congress outputs but also to make its effects sustainable.

At present four prestigious institutions representing rich academic traditions and the intellectual heritage of Indian anthropology have come together to organize it. They are (i) the Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society of India (EFCS) founded in 1945, (ii) the Indian Anthropological Association (IAA) formed in 1964, (iii) the Department of Anthropology at the University of Hyderabad established in 1988, and (iv) the Discipline of Anthropology operational since 2010 at IGNOU. Each one of these captures disciplinary practices after nearly every two decades spread over last 75 glorious years of Indian Independence.

The University of Delhi shall host the main Congress at Delhi followed with a post congress followed with a Post Congress at Hyderabad and other places. The month of October is the time of festivities, social celebrations and cultural extravaganza in India. The festivals of Dussehra and Diwali have different regional variations with polysemic understandings of Indian traditions going back in time. More details are available on the official website iuaes2023delhi.org.

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