

On Anthropology's Shift in Focus to Gain Contemporary Relevance: Some Questions

Rajat Kanti Das

Former Professor and U.G.C. Emeritus Fellow

Department of Anthropology, Vidyasagar University, Midnapore, West Bengal

Email: rajat_p_das@yahoo.com

How relevant today is anthropology's claim as a discipline based on objectively defined criteria? Contemporary developments in the field of anthropology raise this question in the context of anthropology's long cherished tradition of seeing the 'socio-cultural' purely in terms of 'actual facts' without any scope for imagined or attributed meanings bearing the stamp of individual way of looking at things. The situation today is so fluid and diverse that an individual is simultaneously exposed to various cross-currents of ideas, actions and reactions and is subjected not only to a type of experience which produces 'orderly accounts' but also driven to a position from where he or she can scrutinise or decide and judge the utility of such an experience in the present day context. Differences between 'place' and 'non-place', 'known' and 'unknown' have been narrowed down considerably, the immediate effect of which is noticeable in person-to-person relationship. What appears to be impersonal and objective to one person may take the form of 'personal' guided more by subjective consideration of one's dispositions, interest areas and mode of interacting with co-actors in a situation marked by flexibility and increasing mobility. Clearly, new individual experiences and knowledge cannot just be reduced to certain pre-determined objective conditions of living in any specific form. Let us try to explore few emerging areas.

Although a late entrant, anthropology has increasingly been bogged down with the problem of 'politics of representation', which in a sense suggests entering into the world of subjectivity for which anthropology was not fully equipped earlier. After all, politics of representation concerning a group's identity along with the much-talked about 'crisis' in representation faced by it is something which cannot be limited to certain fixed objective conditions. Can the practice of reflexive anthropology deal with the politics of representation and explain it properly? But it also simultaneously questions the value-free position so long advocated by anthropology. Now there has been a growing realisation that anthropologists need to be critiques of their own methodological approach consciously guarded by them to the extent that they take it as something sacrosanct. To an anthropologist deeply committed to the tradition of fieldwork, reality and experience or knowledge derived from the field are almost inseparable components. Decades back, B. Scholte (1972), while pleading for the practice of 'reflexivity', refuted this position. According to him, 'reflexivity' only in its narrower sense sees the self-reflecting anthropologist engaged in the interpersonal relations of fieldwork. In its broader sense, one is a critique of 'the discipline itself, questioning the conditions and mode of producing knowledge about other cultures.' For a long time anthropologist was so preoccupied with the object of study that he or she was not quite prepared to make a distinction between 'text' and 'context' and as such pretended to remain 'apolitical'. It is through the practice of reflexive anthropology that strict adherence to 'the specificity and individuality of the observer' can give way to exploring various forms of subjectivity from observer's point of view, in which 'the politics of representation' is one. For a long time we have been carried away by the individual brilliance of ethnographic fieldworker so much so that we almost subscribed to the view that all good ethnographic works were the result of individual brilliance of ethnographers. While we still appreciate the ethnographic works of B.

Malinowski, Raymond Firth, Edmund Leach, M. Fortes, Evans-Pritchard, Fredrik Barth and others and applaud them as monumental works in the field of anthropology, we are constrained to think that not only has the space and time-bound reality so meticulously produced by them outlived its practical significance, it also signals a change in the mode of transformation from ‘ a formal pattern or type to an activity in which politics, tradition, and interpretation’ converge (Hellen Callaway 1984). Callaway, of course, prescribes increasing use of narrative in anthropology. There is, however, a close link between the narrative and reflexive mind which even takes the form of an imaginative mind in search of unknown and unexplored possibilities. When the reference is particularly made to narrative in the form of a literary text, it is the outcome of intimate observation and searching, reflexive mind of the author. The deep insights derived from such an exercise give the literary text an edge over the anthropological text where anthropologist’s focus on ‘reflexivity’ is either deliberately underplayed or not given prominence because of lack of any meaningful insight. That may be the reason why all cannot be literary text writers. However, in anthropology giving prominence to author may not bear fruit without any institutional support. In other words, it means author’s own experience has to be institutionally linked. To Geertz (1988), the personal experience of the text writer, in his case anthropological text writer, counts a lot. We tend to accept that socio-cultural reality may take the form of an ‘experienced reality’. Such an experience can be built on ‘the author’s experience of travel between ways of life and words of meaning’ (Rapport and Overing 2004:241). Among the institutions of relevance, reference has sometimes been made of ‘Genres’, which have been defined as ‘literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a cultural artefact’ (Jameson 1981:106). It is doubtful whether an anthropologist can freely and faithfully perform such a role without encroaching on other disciplines, where he or she may be unwelcome. In the eyes of other disciplinarians we always remain somewhat suspect, who cannot readily exude confidence about their ability to make positive contributions at the inter-disciplinary level. From our side also, we are rather hesitant to enter into the field of inter-disciplinary research which is of uncertain prospect for us. Instead, we prefer to follow the beaten track without being innovative, which makes our work somewhat unexciting, organized as it is in a set pattern. The ‘literary turn’ in anthropological writings, though limited, may be indicative of increasing visibility of anthropologist as an uninhibited investigator characterised by a free, inquisitive mind. Here, more than the object or subject matter studied, anthropologist’s own mental involvement into the whole process comes to the forefront because it is only he or she who gets thoroughly absorbed in search for meanings. But following a course like that may not receive wholehearted support from the anthropological world.

In our known, familiar world of understanding also there have been significant changes where anthropologist’s reflexive mind gets an opportunity to be directly entangled. Our world views have been changing fast, which may be partly because of encroachment or imposition of material ways of living and partly because of our search for new meanings, new interpolations in line with contextual changes. The term ‘worldview’ derived from the German ‘Weltanscaung’ signifies ‘the common body of beliefs shared by a group of speakers about the world and their relationship to it’. Such a notion has a close relationship with attributed meanings and ultimately with ‘discourse’ and ‘paradigm’, which provide the raw materials in the form of ‘beliefs and assumptions’ to enable one to construct worldviews. The new orientation of society and culture and large scale changes these have undergone as functional entities have changed the outlook of the people. The struggles which now develop from within the society are mostly guided by subjective conception of the struggle by those who are directly involved in it. This is not limited to political struggles alone; the whole society and culture come for a fresh look and a renewed assessment. As Nigel Rapport and Joanna Overing (2004) observe, “The focus has also shifted, from an assumption that ‘cultures’ or ‘societies’

eventuate in common world views to an exploration of how a diversity of world views can co-exist within 'single' socio-cultural settings.”

There is another side of it, which is probably more important for anthropology as a scientific discipline. It is now known that more attention has been directed to ascertain the position of social science (including anthropology) in 'Science and Technology Studies' or 'Science, Technology and Society Studies'. STS now sponsors a large number of studies in the field of social sciences and humanities. When it concerns anthropology, an anthropologically-oriented STS may be worked out based on the nature of relationship between man, society and culture. In STS anthropology along with history, political science, and sociology finds a place. Workings of the sciences and technologies in a social context through multi-sited ethnography come within its purview. Sciences, however, need to be globally distributed and in this venture the scope of exchanges and networks developed in field studies may be extended further. For example, development-oriented dilemmas as experienced in India may have a global dimension and has the potential to be in the global network system. One may even go for a digital method to find a wider participation and representation across the world. What matters is the distribution of anthropologically derived knowledge from a specific study to the global-level participants. But before that more important perhaps is to critically examine the local-global connection and the areas that can directly enter into such a process. Even otherwise, an example may be set as to how a pedagogical or purely academic interest of a researcher can attain the status of public knowledge. From the discipline's point of view, there is a genuine need to clearly establish the historical and cultural context of science and anthropology's role in it. This cannot be done without getting into inter-disciplinary research, much in line with STS's approach.

References

Callaway, H. 1992. 'Ethnography and Experience: Gender Implications in Fieldwork and Texts', in J. Okely and H. Callaway (eds.). *Anthropology and Autobiography*. London: Routledge.

Edgar, Andrew and Peter Sedgwick (eds.). 2004. *Key Concepts in Cultural Theory*. London: Routledge (Indian Reprint).

Geertz, C. 1988. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Cambridge: Polity.

Jameson, F. 1981. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. New York: Cornell University Press.

Rapport, Nigel and Joanna Overing (eds.). *Key Concepts in Social and Cultural Anthropology*. London: Routledge (Indian Reprint).

Scholte, B. 1969. 'Toward a Reflexive and Critical Anthropology', in D. Hymes (ed.). *Reinventing Anthropology*. New York: Pantheon.

Wiki 2014-15 : en.wikipedia.org .