

## **MAN IN INDIA AND S.C. ROY'S HISTORICAL PARTICULARISTIC AND NATIONALISTIC APPROACH: A GENEALOGICAL TREATISE ON CIVILISATIONAL PERSPECTIVE IN INDIAN SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY.**

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**Abstract:** This article traces the historical and epistemological evolution of Indian social anthropology from its colonial institutional backdrop to the emergence of an indigenous, civilisation-centred intellectual tradition. Together, the journal 'Man' of the Royal Anthropological Institute and 'Man in India', founded by S. C. Roy in 1921, provide an institutional basis for analysing how anthropological knowledge was contextualised in colonial India. The essay argues that Roy's significance lies not only in being an early Indian anthropologist but also in his effort to transform Indians from passive objects of colonial ethnographic study into active creators of anthropological knowledge. His ethnographic work on Munda, Oraon, Birhor and Kharia communities reveals a shift from elementary categorisation to historical and contextual understanding. His work on customary law, indigenous institutions, and tribal rights added a distinct ethical and nationalist dimension to his anthropology, with a civilisational bent in sociology and social anthropology. The piece thereafter outlines the evolution of ideas from Roy to G. S. Ghurye, N. K. Bose, and Surajit Sinha. It demonstrates how Bose expanded Roy's concerns within a civilisational framework centred on cultural interchange, tribal assimilation, caste relations, economic interconnectedness, and the equilibrium of unity and diversity. Sinha further reinterpreted this perspective by employing the concepts of 'little tradition', tribe-caste and tribe-peasant continuities, cultural exchange, and state evolution. These cognitive trajectories collectively signify a gradual shift from colonial anthropology to Indian-focused theoretical and practical approaches: Indian anthropology.

**Keywords:** Man in India, S.C. Roy, N.K. Bose, S. Sinha, Civilisational approach, Indian social anthropology.

***Educated Indians could best study the Indian man, and their participation would be a great gain for the 'Indian nation' (S.C. Roy, 1921, p. 55).***

### **From 'Man' to 'Man India': The Colonial Context of Social Anthropology/ Sociology**

Till the classical work, *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* of Talal Asad (1973), subsequently elaborated by many scholars in different historical disciplinary contexts with colonial or empire interests (Stocking, 1987; Kuklick, 1991; Fabian, 1983; Pels & Salemink, 1999;) and colonial anthropological knowledge production and its subsequent impact on many social institutions of India including caste (Cohn,

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1987a, 1996; Dirks, 2001) and geographical historical contexts of the politics of knowledge production specific to colonial governing India (Cohn, 1987a, 1996; Baber, 1996; Trautmann, 1997), and other British colonies. But during the colonial period, a person who was not trained in anthropology or philology or ethnology or even history, but in law, with his historically located intellectualism, and the nature of free interaction with, and familiarity with, tribes, turned to an Indian anthropologist; I may not be wrong to say the pioneer of Indian anthropology: Sarat Chandra Roy.

To convert a propositional statement into metatheoretical empirical analysis supporting my claim that Sarat Chandra Roy's cardinal contribution is the institutional and epistemological transformation of social anthropology in colonial India, this necessitates a distinct canvas beyond this article (see Dasgupta 2016), although we commence this article with Roy's anticolonial epistemic basis of Indian social anthropology, frequently referred to as a variant of 'nationalist sociology'. His importance resides not solely in being the inaugural 'Indian anthropologist', but rather in not being an anthropologist of India or one practising in India. His ethnographic works and the journal *Man in India* helped create a platform for Indians to generate insights into Indian society, while also engaging with colonial anthropologists. When colonial anthropologists reduced Indian individuals and culture to mere objects, Roy adopted a subjective-objectivity by incorporating Western insights into India's historical context, during the same phase as Franz Boas (1896, 1911, 1920), and Margaret Mead (1928, 1935) or after Boas's popularisation of the dictum 'historical particularism' in anthropology, and later Boas's disciples' popularised the framework (from Benedict, 1934; Lowie, 1937 to Darnell 2001).

In other words, to understand Roy's historical particularism and nationalist social anthropology, we need to look at his ethnographic work alongside his writings in *Man in India*,<sup>1</sup> though the article avoids a detailed discussion of the historicity of Roy's social-epistemology<sup>2</sup>. Roy's contributions should first be situated within the colonial intellectual environment (Ali, 1922). He received a legal education and practised law in Ranchi, where his professional endeavours linked him closely with the Munda, Oraon, and several other indigenous communities. Rather than seeing these groups merely as objective primitives or savages, Roy gradually sought to understand their institutions, customary laws, religious traditions, social frameworks, and cultural realities (Bose, 1986; Dasgupta, 2004; Burman, 2011). Roy's publications (Roy, 1912) *The Mundas and Their Country* and (Roy, 1915) *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur* marked important milestones in this development. The latter concentrated exclusively on the historical, economic, and social frameworks of the Oraons (Dasgupta, 2004).

Roy employed categories and theoretical constructs from European anthropology, such as evolutionary, diffusionist and comparative approaches. He worked slowly at establishing an Indian perspective in anthropological research.

Dasgupta (2007) is relevant here in his study of Roy, who moved through Victorian evolutionism, diffusionism, and finally functionalism in his search for an Indian perspective that would make anthropology a contributor to national unity (Dasgupta, 2007). Roy should therefore be seen not as simply ignoring Western anthropology, but as appropriating, adapting, and indigenising it.

### **The Colonial Context of Nationalist Sociology and Social Anthropology**

The institutional development of ethnology and anthropology in Britain was closely connected with the emergence of colonial-administrative and academic anthropology in India in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Sunil, 2007). The Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland (RAI), with its publishing and scholarly heritage rooted in the ethnological and anthropological societies established in nineteenth-century London, played a pivotal role in this historical narrative within colonial and Western racial theoretical environments (Stocking, 1971; Asad, 1973). During the twentieth century, the journal *Man* collected, classified, debated, and distributed anthropological insights under the aegis of the RAI. *Man* ran from 1901 to 1994, when it was later rebranded as *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (JRAI)*. Consequently, its publication history functions as an important institutional lineage for modern anthropology (Stocking, 1971).

*Man's* history is especially pertinent to India because British anthropology evolved alongside colonial ethnography. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, British administrators, ethnographers, census officials, and scholars created detailed descriptions of Indian tribes, castes, religions, languages, kinship systems and customary institutions (Cohn, 1987b; Bayly, 2000, 2003). Anthropology thus emerged in India not only as an academic subject but also as a type of colonial knowledge (Uberoi, 2007) or, as I would prefer to put it, an anthropological 'colonial institution' (Sunil, 2007). In this broader intellectual context, Roy started *Man in India* in Ranchi in 1921. The first issue was named '*Man in India: A Quarterly Record of Anthropological Science with Special Reference to India*'.

But the relation between *Man* and *Man in India* is not a simple institutional cause-and-effect relationship. The *Man* in Britain represented the institutional consolidation of anthropology and colonial interests, while the *Man* in India represented an important process of geographical and intellectual localisation of anthropology in colonial India, with a nationalist project of engaging with colonial and native anthropologists. But the latter adopted the anthropological methodologies and discussions, and increasingly made space for Indian researchers to be producers, not subjects, of anthropological knowledge (Sarkar, 2010).

While European anthropologists increasingly tried to classify human communities by physical attributes, language, customs, religion, technology,

and family and social organisation within the racial superiority of the Western white, the journal became more than a vehicle for publishing research. It became an institutional structure through which the discipline defined what counted as anthropological knowledge. Bernard Cohn (1996) showed how colonial administration relied on certain "forms of knowledge" to represent Indian society and make it administratively intelligible. Similarly, Nicholas Dirks (2001) stated that colonialism changed the historical meanings and institutional relevance of caste by bringing it into modern systems of enumeration, classification and administration.

Colonial Census officers like Herbert Risley (1891, 1908). William Crooke (1896), Denzil Ibbetson (1883) and other colonial ethnographers created voluminous studies of Indian castes and tribes. For example, Fuller (2017) highlights the centrality of Risley and Crooke for colonial ethnographic study of tribes and castes. In many ways, the colonial administration took caste as a basic basis for comprehending Indian society. Risley's (1908) ethnographic writings connected caste with race, social standing, occupation, marriage, and physical anthropometry. These divisions were further institutionalised in the census, notably after Risley's ethnographic survey of India. In short, Mukherjee (1997) rightly put it;

They advanced a kind of 'mosaic theory' of Indian society and culture by focusing more on cultural diversity than on its unity. It was chiefly their concerns, styles of narration or presentation, their methods of collection and interpretation of data, and above all their conceptual frameworks that pioneers of Indian sociology emulated consciously or unconsciously (Mukherjee, 1977, pp. 22–23).

In the institutional history of Indian anthropology, S. C. Roy [1871-1942] is central to colonialism and the anthropological production of knowledge about Indian society and culture. His anthropological investigations of the *Munda* (Roy, 1912), *Oraon* (Roy, 1915; Roy, 1927), *Birhor* (Roy, 1925), *Kharia* (Roy, 1937), and other groups made him a pioneer of Indian ethnography. Roy's intellectual activities are notable, as his anthropological-ethnographic monographs predated the foundation of the institution of *Man in India*. Thus, he brought considerable anthropological competence to the publication's founding. At the same time, the journal introduced a new institutional idea: a continuous anthropological publication in India that would address Indian society and culture (see Sinha, 1971).

The *Man to Man in India* can therefore be seen as part of a larger project of localising anthropological understanding or a project of historical particularism. Rather than presenting 'India' from a Eurocentric point of view, anthropology in India began to see things differently. Yet, despite similarities and differences that we highlight in this essay, Indian intellectuals from Roy to N.K. Bose and Surajith Sinha gradually took on the roles of researchers, writers, editors, and institutional co-ordinators, creating a platform for representing India as a unified civilisation.

Roy or *Man in India* did not produce an Indian anthropology on the spot. Rather, it produced a hybrid intellectual field in which Western theories, colonial ethnography and Indian intellectual traditions came together.

The journal was undoubtedly a notable institutional accomplishment. The journal was envisioned as a scholarly anthropological publication exclusively focused on India. *Man in India*'s significance extended beyond its role as an academic publication. It signified an endeavour to establish an Indian institutional framework for generating anthropological knowledge (Sarkar, 2010).

In this setting, Roy's nationalism did not signify a dismissal of global academic discourse. Western academics continued to contribute to the publication from the first volume. Later, Surajit Sinha (1985) noted that Roy's efforts were motivated by the national needs of his time and his own commitment to nationalism, while also providing Indian scholars opportunities to benefit from Western academic viewpoints and contributions (Sinha, 1985). This is crucial for comprehending Roy's nationalism (Sinha, 2020a; Sinha, 2020b). His endeavour can be characterised as 'non-Western epistemic nationalism' rather than intellectual isolationism. He wanted Indians to become producers of anthropological knowledge rather than merely subjects of European ethnographic inquiry.

### **The Nationalist Social Anthropology of S.C. Roy**

Roy's scholarship therefore developed at the intersection of law, anthropology, colonial administration, indigenous society and emerging Indian nationalism (Dasgupta, 2004; Guha, 2020). Roy's importance, however, cannot be reduced to his status as a pioneering ethnographer. His larger significance lies in his attempt to transform anthropology from an essentially colonial field of knowledge into a discipline that could be pursued from an Indian standpoint. His nationalism did not imply a rejection of Western anthropological methodology. Rather, Roy sought to appropriate scientific anthropology while changing the intellectual purposes and social location of anthropological knowledge. In this sense, his work represents an early movement from colonial anthropology toward nationalist anthropology in India (Guha, 2020; Guha, 2023).

Roy's intellectual development was gradual and internally contradictory. Sangeeta Dasgupta (2004) shows that Roy's earlier writings were influenced by British social anthropology and that his position shifted over his career. His later advocacy of an "Indian approach" emerged through intellectual transformation rather than a complete rupture with colonial anthropology. Thus, Roy's nationalism can be understood as an attempt to reorient the production of anthropological knowledge, rather than simply to replace European scholars with Indian scholars. This section on his nationalist sociology, therefore, locates the colonial context of Roy and, as

a lawyer, focuses mainly on three interconnected themes: his ethnographic studies engaged with tribal society and customary law; his attempt to establish an Indian school of anthropology through *Man in India*, as we have discussed; and the philosophical and civilisational implications of his nationalist anthropology. This section connects Roy's intellectual project with Nirmal Kumar Bose's civilisational approach, arguing that Bose extended some of Roy's concerns about Indian cultural integration, but into a more Hindu civilisational anthropology.

Guha (2020b) describes Roy as a nationalist anthropologist because his research was motivated substantially by concern for the oppressed tribal populations of Chotanagpur rather than by administrative or missionary objectives. His legal practice also brought him into direct contact with Munda, Oraon, and other tribal communities. This legal encounter was crucial because Roy (1938) observed that the colonial legal system often operated with inadequate knowledge of tribal customary law, social institutions, and cultural practices;

Anyone having had occasion to watch at close quarters the administration of justice in certain aboriginal areas of India will be struck by the amount of injustice done, in spite of the best intentions, by judges and magistrates and police officers of all grades, owing to their ignorance of the customs and mentality of the aboriginal tribes they have to deal with (Roy, 1938/1966, p. 27)

The problem was not simply that colonial administrators lacked information; legal decisions concerning tribal communities could be distorted when judges and lawyers failed to understand their social organisation. Roy consequently began studying tribal languages, customs, religion, land tenure and customary law (Roy, 1912, 1915, 1921, 1925, 1927, 1935, 1937). His ethnography closely reflected the lived experiences of people who appeared before him in legal contexts (Guha, 2020). He came to understand that law could not be separated from culture. Customary law was embedded within kinship, land, village organisation, religion and collective memory. To understand a legal dispute concerning land, therefore, required understanding the social institutions through which land was inherited, cultivated and collectively regulated. This insight contributed to his holistic ethnographic method. For instance, Roy's (1912) *The Mundas and Their Country* was a foundational work in Indian ethnography, offering extensive discussion of Munda history, land tenure, social organisation, mythology, religion, and traditions. The title itself is significant. Roy did not write merely about "Munda customs"; he connected the people to their geography, historicity, culture, and politics in a single ethnographic framework, as historical particularism emphasised.

His analysis of the *Khuntkatti* system, village organisation, land rights and relations with landlords and colonial authorities demonstrated that tribal society could not be explained solely in terms of ritual or 'primitive' cultural traits. Economic

institutions and historical processes were no less significant. Rather than viewing tribal society as simply a lower stage in human development, Roy reconstructed institutions historically. The Munda community did not emerge as an abstract 'primitive tribe' but as a historically located society with its own institutions, collective memory and relationship to territory. Roy's anthropology can thus be read as a move from classification to contextualisation.

Roy's methodological contribution too reflected his insistence on learning local languages and understanding indigenous institutions. His ethnography was based on extended contact with communities, not just administrative reports. It is especially important to note how important language is. Anthropology is at heart interpretive. If researchers only rely on translated statements or colonial reports, the conceptual categories of the people being studied can become distorted. By learning tribal languages, Roy could engage more directly with indigenous concepts, narratives, and institutions.

His legal education also stressed close attention to customary practices. Rather than assuming that written colonial law represented the totality of social regulation, Roy examined the customary norms through which communities regulated marriage, inheritance, land, political authority, and social relations. This methodological orientation foreshadowed subsequent developments in Indian anthropology that highlighted the significance of participant observation, indigenous categories, and contextual interpretation.

His representations of the Oraons changed over time, and his earlier writings sometimes reflected British anthropological assumptions. Consequently, Roy's nationalist anthropology should be understood as a historical process of intellectual repositioning (Sinha, 2020a; Sinha, 2020b; Sinha, 2023). The *Dhumkuria*, or youth dormitory, and the *parha* system were central to his analysis of Oraon social organisation. These institutions showed that tribal societies had complex mechanisms of socialisation, political coordination, and collective life. He demonstrated that institutions existed outside the bureaucratic state and that collective norms could be generated through community structures. Roy's ethnography showed that social organisation could take multiple institutional forms, a pattern later described as multicultural sociology. Again, moving to a functionalist approach while analysing religion, he holds that Religion is not merely a collection of superstitions, but is embedded in agriculture, village solidarity, festivals, social morality, and relationships with ancestors and supernatural powers. In this respect, Roy's anthropology moved toward a more functional understanding of culture.

The nationalist character of Roy's anthropology becomes most visible when we consider the broader question of who had the authority to produce knowledge about Indian society. This is certainly a question within the politics of knowledge

and epistemology in the wider area of philosophy of social science. During colonial rule, European scholars possessed considerable institutional authority to describe Indian communities. European scholars frequently represented Indian society through European categories and theories (Inden, 1986, 1990; Bates, C. (1995; Cohn, 1996; Trautmann, 1997; Dirks, 2001; Uberoi, Sundar, & Deshpande, 2007). Roy's intervention challenged this intellectual monopoly.

Instead, he believed Indian scholars could apply scientific methods while incorporating perspectives drawn from India's historical and cultural experiences. That is why the expression "Indian point of view" is especially useful for understanding Roy. He did not want to reject Western anthropology altogether or copy it wholesale. He sought a synthesis. Guha (2020b) notes that Roy's nationalism was compatible with openness to Western scholarship. This is clearest in *Man in India*, where Western and Indian scholars published research. This position matters because Roy's nationalism was methodological rather than merely political, or, as we might prefer to call it, an epistemological nationalism (See also Guha, 2023, pp. 47-50).

Since colonial ethnography portrayed tribes as different and India as not constituting a nation or civilisation (Srivatsan, 2005; Markovits, 2023), Roy's anthropology raised a difficult question: how should tribal communities relate to the emerging Indian nation? This issue became increasingly important during the nationalist period. Tribal communities occupied an ambiguous position. They were simultaneously represented as distinct communities and incorporated into broader conceptions of Indian civilisation. Yet "integration" can have two meanings. Later, especially after Ghurye's, Varrier Elwin's, and Nehru's debate on tribe and national integration, two positions emerged: inclusive integration, emphasised by Elwin and Nehru, which recognises diverse communities as equal components of a larger political community; and assimilation, from N.K. Bose and G.S. Ghurye, which pleads for incorporation of minority or tribal communities into a dominant cultural framework of Brahmanical caste structure.

Quite notably, Roy's work contains tensions between these possibilities. His ethnographies preserved substantial evidence of tribal cultural distinctiveness, while his nationalism encouraged thinking about tribal communities as part of the wider Indian social formation. One can certainly criticise Roy's nationalist anthropology by arguing that it cannot be understood entirely through secular political nationalism (see also Guha, 2018). Roy's central question was whether anthropology could explain the unity underlying India's cultural diversity. Roy increasingly viewed anthropology as capable of demonstrating relationships between apparently distinct communities.

Alongside his ethnographic work, his deeper contribution was epistemological: he challenged the colonial monopoly over producing knowledge about Indian

society and, therefore, nationalistic, but his nationalist anthropology was close to laying the foundation for a civilizational perspective in Indian sociology and social anthropology. But Roy did not solely support the mechanical integration of tribes into Hindu civilisation. His later essays reveal a more sophisticated perspective: tribal communities should engage with the broader national framework while safeguarding their invaluable indigenous traditions and institutions (Roy, 1931; Roy, 1936; Roy, 1937/1986; also see Roy, 1938).

Sangeeta Dasgupta (2004) asserts that this was part of Roy's later endeavours to cultivate an "Indian perspective" in anthropology and his belief that anthropology could facilitate the integration of national life (Dasgupta, 2004, pp. 176–177). Roy believed that reciprocal comprehension was vital for unity. Anthropology can diminish social distance by fostering mutual understanding among people from various cultural backgrounds. Later (Roy, 1938, in Dasgupta, 2004, pp. 196–197), he suggests that studying people from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, along with their traditions and rituals, may increase goodwill and strengthen ties in Indian society. Consequently, Roy's comprehensive monographs and papers challenged the inclination to consider tribes as completely separate social units. *The Chota Nagpur Oraons* (Roy, 1915) did not limit its account of tribal practices to a single form. It explored the historical, geographical, economic, communal and social background of the Oraons. This extensive research highlighted the importance of cultural participation. Communities engaged with neighbouring factions, assimilated cultural aspects, and transformed their systems; they were not static entities beyond historical context. Roy's (1928) *Oraon Religion and Customs* is particularly important because it explains how engagement with diverse religious and cultural practices has transformed Oraon religious and social life. The monograph's foreword notes Roy's observation that the Oraons incorporated elements of Hindu religious practices while adapting them to align with their indigenous traditions. Consequently, instead of only administrative or physical inclusion, Roy's framework may be defined by the agents themselves as 'dialogical-cultural interactive integration'.

In his article "The Significance of Anthropological Research in India," Roy (1921) argued that anthropology could help develop suitable methods for "acculturation", or what he called "incul[tu]ration", which would allow tribal groups to absorb advantageous elements of the dominant culture while maintaining crucial indigenous customs and structures (Roy, 1938/1966; Dasgupta, 2004, pp. 196–197). The idea that indigenous tribes should be abandoned to live in destitution and exploitation was rejected by Roy. He aimed for greater community involvement, economic growth, and education. On the other hand, his use of terms like "uplift" and "higher culture" upheld a hierarchical conception of civilisation. According to Dasgupta (2004), Roy never fully broke free from the notion that

the nearby "civilised" society's culture was superior to tribal culture. Although Roy acknowledged his detractors, he did not advocate eradicating tribal culture. According to his formula, native customs and socially important institutions might be preserved while incorporating positive elements of a larger culture (Roy, 1938). For instance, Roy thoroughly explored institutions such as village organisation, the *parha* system, and youth dormitories in his (Roy, 1915) book *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur*. His depiction of the *Dhumkuria* suggested that Oraon culture had organised socialisation, governance, and communal life systems. How is it possible that their analysis of Munda land systems and practices showed that tribal institutions were more than just relics from the past, he posed (Roy, 19012)? They created social governance operational frameworks. His documentation of traditional law had real repercussions, since a lack of understanding of tribal land systems might lead to land loss and exploitation, which is still a major problem for tribal land in postcolonial India. Thus, economic justice requires recognition and protection as a requirement for integration. His examination of Oraon religious and reform activities makes this especially clear. Although Oraon discontent normally appeared in a socio-religious setting, its underlying causes were usually economic, according to the preface to *Oraon Religion and Customs* (Roy, 1928). This is a key component of Roy's anthropological research. He saw tribal transformation as more than just a change in culture. Important components of colonial capitalism's political economy included land appropriation, exploitation, and unequal relations with outside parties. His understanding of the responsibilities of broader Indian society was shaped by his concern about economic exploitation; he argued that those who professed a "superior civilisation" bore a responsibility to aid marginalised tribal communities that had suffered social discrimination and exploitation (Roy, 1938, pp. 30–31).

Thus, his notion of integration had a moral and redistributive dimension: tribal tribes were to be assimilated into national society as recipients of justice rather than solely as objects of cultural change. He claimed that by fostering mutual understanding and deepening knowledge of other groups, anthropology could help address the country's issues. This reflects a vital part of Roy's later conceptual viewpoint, as Dasgupta (2004, p. 177) notes: anthropology aimed to promote the "integration" of national identity.

In this context, the tribe was regarded as integral to the nation. India's social structure, by contrast, was varied and included tribal communities. Anthropology can diminish intergroup animosity by clarifying connections among diverse societies. This viewpoint is essential for understanding Roy's nationalism. His objective was not solely to elevate anthropology to a credible academic field. He believed anthropology had a societal purpose, suggesting that awareness of cultural diversity could foster empathy, understanding, and unity within the nation. Therefore, it would be incorrect to simply classify Roy as an assimilationist. His position was

more nuanced than the latter interpretation, which emphasised tribal absorption into Hindu culture, as argued by G. S. Guyre and N. K. Bose. Roy rejected the idea that tribal communities should give up their distinctive structures, but he also denounced government-mandated isolation (Dasgupta, 2004, pp. 197–198). Roy's position was therefore a middle ground between integration and solitude. While emphasising the preservation of regionally relevant social institutions, he welcomed cultural exchange and growth. The tribal integration approach developed by S. C. Roy should be viewed as a complex integrationist and nationalist-humanitarian endeavour. His goal was to protect indigenous customs and institutions of lasting significance while involving tribal people in the larger Indian national framework through knowledge, education, social reform, economic equity, and cultural interchange.

The academic development from S. C. Roy to N. K. Bose is significant. Roy's anthropology focused primarily on recognising tribal social and cultural structures and developing ethnographic understanding of certain tribes. Bose extended the analytical framework to Indian civilisation, historical developments and cultural realms. It was later published in the journal *Man* (Roy, 1938), which contended that Indian anthropology needs a critical engagement with the distinctive social, cultural and historical contexts of India, rather than blindly imitating Western paradigms. He stresses the need for a sympathetic and rigorous understanding of indigenous peoples, their customs, beliefs, and social systems, through fieldwork. The essay shows Roy's extensive academic efforts to establish anthropology as a discipline grounded in Indian experience (Roy, 1938). It also anticipates future debates about the interrelations between colonial knowledge, indigenous perspectives and the development of an independent Indian anthropological and sociological tradition.

### **N. K. Bose and Indological Civilisational Perspective**

S. C. Roy's anthropological writings provide one of the earliest examples of a nationalist-civilizational perspective of Indian society. Roy based his investigations on detailed ethnographic studies of the Mundas, Oraons, and other communities, in opposition to colonial accounts that often reduced tribal people to racial, evolutionary, or bureaucratic categories. His research established a theoretical relationship between tribal ethnography and the study of Indian civilisation, and eventually placed tribal institutions in the larger historical and cultural context of Indian society.

This approach anticipated the later views of G. S. Ghurye and N. K. Bose, who developed a more dynamic understanding of Indian civilisation that emphasised cultural contact, adaptation, and the persistence of local institutions, but it did not dictate them. Ghurye emphasised the historical assimilation and cultural integration of indigenous people into the broader Hindu social framework. Roy, Ghurye, and Bose hold divergent views on the relationship between tribal uniqueness and

civilisational cohesion; therefore, they should not be categorised within a single theoretical framework. Nevertheless, collectively, these writings mark a significant transition toward anthropological knowledge rooted in Indian historical and cultural frameworks, while also scrutinising the remnants of colonial anthropology.

G. S. Ghurye's (1932/1959) *Caste and Race in India* is highly critical of Risley's approach, arguing that "it was Risley who, under special circumstances, applied anthropometry to the solution of the problem of caste" (Ghurye, 1959, pp. 27–28). It begins by describing the features of the caste system and caste across different ages, drawing on texts such as the Vedic Samhitas, Epics, Buddhist literature, and Dharma shastras. The first chapter, 'Race and caste', was an adaptation of his paper 'The Ethnic Theory of Caste', which had already appeared in 1924 in the journal 'Man in India' (Ghurye, 1924) and subsequently elaborated in "Civilizations and Fecundity" (Ghurye, 1925), culminating in a monograph (Ghurye, 1932/1959).

On the one hand, Ghurye continued S.C. Roy's nationalist epistemic foundation, rejecting colonial anthropology and racial theory (Ghurye, 1938), and also maintained the view that the caste system is a Brahminical brainchild. For reasons beyond colonial criticism, Ghurye did not continue publishing in *Man in India* (Meantime *Journal of the University of Bombay*, begun in 1932, where Ghurye started publishing). Secondly, he followed an Indological approach and relied heavily on Brahmanical literature, leading him to argue that tribes are imperfectly integrated Hindus and must assimilate into the broader Brahmanically defined Hindu system (Ghurye 1943, 1958), whereas SC Roy's integration emphasised unity in diversity and a dialogical, sympathetic, internal, natural process of change. Thirdly, Ghurye might not have wanted to be identified with anthropology, but rather sociology, even though one of the collections of his essays in book form is titled '*Anthropo-sociological papers*' (Ghurye, 1963).

But Nirmal Kumar Bose [1901–1972] continued S.C. Roy's project in both directions: extending his approach to an Indologically oriented anthropological civilisational perspective and to the practical principles and agenda of Indian anthropology after independence (Bose 1952, 1962). Following the methodological pattern of Roy, N.K Bose (1952, 1962) focused on different social aspects of Juangs (Bose, 1928, 1929, 1930), developing into a systematic Indological-anthropological perspective on a civilisational approach starting in tribal absorption (Bose, 1941), further elaborating in his Bengali work *Hindu Samjer Gedan* [The Structure of Hindu Society] (Bose, 1949/1996), but continuously encompassing the idea of Roy that unity in diversity and national integration (Bose, 1941, 1961, 1967, 1971a, 1971b, 1972a).

Bose also saw Indian society not as a mere aggregation of separate communities, but as a set of historical interconnections among distinct groups and the emergence

of a comprehensive cultural unity that preserved social and cultural variety. His principal works, especially *Cultural Anthropology* (Bose, 1929), "The Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption" (Bose, 1941), *The Structure of Hindu Society* (1949; English translation 1975), *Peasant Life in India* (Bose, 1961), *Culture and Society in India* (Bose, 1967), and "Some Aspects of Indian Civilization" (Bose, 1971), explicitly exhibit this persistent interest in the historical and cultural framework of Indian society. Bose's research was distinctive because he focused on relationships, processes, and historical change, unlike colonial official anthropology. His question was not so much about the identity of a particular tribe or caste, but about how it came to occupy a distinctive position in Indian society. In *Cultural Anthropology* (Roy, 1929), anthropology was envisioned broadly as the examination of culture rather than merely the analysis of so-called "primitive" societies. Bose's subsequent endeavours progressively utilised this viewpoint about India.

It may be inappropriate to simplify his idea of tribal absorption to solely a Brahmanical perspective, as his ethnographic investigations of tribes, castes, hamlets, or occupational groupings and their significance cannot be entirely understood without examining their connections to other groups and broader historical transformations. Civilisation, in this context, was not a uniform cultural entity, but rather a historical phenomenon that emerged from interaction, adaptation, integration, diversity, and exchange. This concept of civilisation enabled Bose to examine the connection between unity and diversity within Indian society.

Bose presents this hypothesis in "The Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption" (Bose, 1942), and his analysis of tribal absorption is crucial to his civilisational perspective because it refutes the notion that tribal societies were consistently separate from Indian civilisation. He investigated historical instances of indigenous groups interacting with Hindu societal systems, spiritual customs, and economic models. His narrative, however, suggests that the process was not solely a unilateral alteration of tribes by Hindu culture. In this framework, Bose's elucidation of "absorption" served to shift anthropological focus from seclusion to cultural interrelation. Bose was captivated by the manner in which communities were interlaced within the broader social fabric. In his research, he examined the spiritual customs, social frameworks, and interactions of tribal groups such as the Juangs with the neighbouring Hindu community. The argument's significance lies in showing that the distinction between tribe and caste is not immutable, but changes over time. This thesis is elaborated more methodically in *The Structure of Hindu Society*, released in Bengali in 1949 and rendered into English in 1975.

Bose's concept of caste possessed an economic aspect. Caste was not merely a ceremonial system; it also encompassed occupation, production, and economic connection. Historically, trade and service networks connected many professional factions. The civilisational perspective, consequently, encompassed material,

cultural, and religious connections. This matters because it ensured that Bose's concept of civilisation transcended mere literary or philosophical discourse, manifesting instead in quotidian institutions, professions, economic endeavours, rituals, and frameworks of social interaction.

Based on traditional Brahmanical texts and direct experience from the field, he argued that the tribal community is being absorbed into the Hindu caste system. He wrote that this essay aimed to draw our countrymen's attention to specific instances showing how tribal customs and rites are often modified in the process of social absorption (Bose, 1996, pp. 168-189). Bose argues that the Juangs, a tribe living in central Orissa, had started worshipping a Hindu goddess. "Taking a bath in the morning, offering sun-dried rice, the term satya, dharma, all prove how strongly Juang religious ceremonies have been influenced by those of neighbouring Brahmanical people" (Ibid., 169).

Juang live outside the fold of Hinduism and have their own language and priest. The Hindus do not seem to consider them as one of the Hindu castes either. Bose argues that;

There is an indication that Hindu religious ideas have penetrated into their culture. The Juangs seem to be losing pride in their own culture and are adopting Hindu culture with a certain amount of avidity" (Ibid., 169).

He observed that, because of state restrictions on hunting, they were forced to adopt cultivation in the valleys. He points out that they also work with bamboo and sell baskets, wicker-boxes, and winnowing fans to neighbouring people, and with this money they buy rice, clothes, iron, and salt. Bose (1996) says;

Thus, instead of being economically more or less self-contained, they have now been tagged on to the larger body of Hindu society; they now form only one cog in the wheel of the advanced productive machinery of the Hindus. In the matter of this manufacture of bamboo articles, the Juangs enjoy virtual monopoly in the state of Pal Lahara, and no other caste would willingly engage in that manufacture for fear of losing its own social position (Bose, 1996, p. 170).

Oraons and Mundas had a similar trend. In the Manda Parab festival, held in Vaishakh or Jaistha, they were invested with a sacred thread by a Vaishnava Gosain belonging to the Ranait sect. Participants kept the sacred thread for three days, during which they abstained from meat, fish, salt, turmeric, and spices and ate only rice and fruits, some milk, and a few sweets. During this term of ceremony, Bose says, the Oraons and Mundas virtually live the life of a pure Hindu devotee (Ibid., 171). Thus, Bose acknowledges that social mobility was possible in the caste system. He argues that;

It is first of all clear that the caste system is not exactly as immutable as it is generally assumed to be. There are occasional fissions within one caste, as well as

absorption of tribal groups from outside into the Hindu social organisation. New recruits like Juangs or the Mundas may not exactly now be called Hindu castes, for they have yet retained their independent social rites which are not ruled by Brahmins. But here perhaps we see the operation of a method by the means of which the Hindus absorbed tribal groups within their own system" (Bose, 1996, p. 174).

Going back to Manu-Dharmashastra and his occupational assignment to different castes, Bose then argues that "Hindu society when absorbing a new tribe or while creating a new jati by differentiation of occupations, always guaranteed or tried to guarantee monopoly in a particular occupation to each caste within a region" (Bose, 1996, p. 174).

The relationship between economic structure and cultural assimilation is central to Bose's understanding of village communities. His *Peasant Life in India: A Study in Indian Unity and Diversity* (Bose, 1961) illustrates the link between the factual study of peasant life and the broader investigation of Indian civilisation. The title raises one of his central sociological questions: how can India exhibit significant local and regional variety while also demonstrating broader cultural cohesion? Studying agrarian societies gave Bose the opportunity to analyse the relationship between local social structures and broader cultural trends. Thus, village organisation, occupational specialisation, religious institutions, kinship, technology, and economic interactions shaped the establishment of civilisation; his anthropological approach sought to integrate empirical observation with historical analysis.

This combination is also evident in *Cultural Anthropology and Other Essays* (Bose, 1953, see also Bose, 1961), where Bose used anthropology to investigate Indian cultural paradigms while also considering broader anthropological investigations. His academic endeavour deviated from the colonial tendency to limit anthropology primarily to indigenous groups, believing anthropological analysis was equally important for investigating larger Indian society. This was a major step forward in developing an indigenous Indian social anthropology. His anthropology, which treated culture as a dynamic system of human activities rather than a fixed assortment of traditions, allowed him to explore cultural transformation and engagement; in the Indian context, it enabled him to examine how various communities participated in broader cultural-creation processes.

Bose's emphasis on national cohesion was another important component of his civilisational perspective. His work, *Problems of National Integration* (Bose, 1967), directly addressed how to promote unity in a socially and culturally heterogeneous India. For Bose (1967), national integration should not mean cultural uniformity; rather, India's historical variety must be integrated into the national structure. His sociological approach to civilisation thus linked anthropology to a more comprehensive investigation of the relationship between cultural variety and national cohesion. That is, Bose acknowledged the importance of India's classical legacy but maintained that civilisation should be examined through lived social

experience. The Munda, Juang, agrarian, caste community, or city dweller was equally important to understanding Indian civilisation as the classical literature. As a result, his approach facilitated a dialogue between ethnography and history. Thus, Bose's perspective on civilisation can therefore be summed up in four interconnected claims: Indian society should be viewed through a historical lens rather than as an immutable social structure; Indian communities should be assessed in relation to one another rather than as distinct entities; cultural cohesion can coexist with considerable social and regional variation; and civilisation is sustained through everyday institutions, economic ties, religious practices, and cultural exchanges rather than exclusively through written traditions.

Quite interestingly, in "Some Aspects of Indian Civilisation" (Bose, 1971), he continued to use the civilisational viewpoint during a period when Indian sociology was increasingly influenced by village studies, structural-functionalism (Sunil, 2013), modernisation theory, and empirical social research. Later scholarly work on Indian society was also influenced by the civilisational perspective. Surajit Sinha's study of the tribe-caste continuum and the relationship between tribal and agrarian societies raised questions that complemented Bose's emphasis on interaction and cultural assimilation, while Milton Singer's study of the social structure of Indian civilisation considered the interaction between local customs and larger civilisational dynamics as a central problem in Indian anthropology. As a result, Bose's contributions were essential to a larger intellectual endeavour to develop frameworks for empirically oriented cum Indian rooted Indian anthropology (see also Sinha, 1986, 1970; Chaudhury, 2007).

### **Surajith Sinha and Social Anthropological and Sociological Civilisational Approach.**

Surajit Chandra Sinha [1926-2002], like Roy and Bose, though his major writings appeared in post-independent India, worked within a wider intellectual effort among Indian scholars to move beyond colonial representations of India as a collection of isolated tribes, castes, villages and religious communities. Sinha also sought to understand them through their historical, cultural and structural relationships within the wider framework of Indian civilisation. His approach was strongly influenced by Robert Redfield (1955), Milton Singer (1955), McKim Marriott (1955) and, especially, Nirmal Kumar Bose, but he modified their formulations through a more differentiated analysis of tribal societies, caste groups, peasant communities and processes of state formation. Robert Redfield (1955), Milton Singer (1955, see especially chapter 13), and McKim Marriott (1955) argue that rural communities must be analysed in relation to broader cultural, economic, political, and civilisational frameworks to be understood as unique social entities. They helped shape what is commonly known as a rural–urban or folk–urban continuum

by contesting the clear separation between rural areas and metropolitan centres. Redfield developed a more extensive theoretical model for the relationship between peasant communities and civilisation, along with the folk-urban continuum. He later adapted his ideas to India, even though his main empirical research was conducted in Mexico. Using the concepts of Great Tradition and Little Tradition, Singer applied this framework to India (Singer, 1955), arguing that Indian villages were connected to broader civilisational hubs. His investigation centred on the interchange of traditions between urban/civilizational hubs and indigenous communities. Marriott (1955) used his study of the Kishan Garhi hamlet in Uttar Pradesh to empirically demonstrate this relationship. His theories of *universalisation* and *parochialization* elucidated the mutual exchange of cultural resources between the small village and the broader Indian civilisation.

Thus, their combined inputs gave readers a perspective on the Indian village within a larger civilisational setting, rather than as an isolated entity. Sinha's contribution was crucial in so much as he operationalised these ideas within the framework of tribal groups and their relation to caste and agrarian civilisations. He was the first scholar to link tribal communities with the larger cultural processes of Indian civilisation, rather than to exclude them from these processes as in his path-breaking study, "Tribal Cultures of Peninsular India as a Dimension of Little Tradition in the Study of Indian Civilization" (Sinha, 1958). At the same time, Sinha did not simply reproduce N. K. Bose's idea of the "Hindu method of tribal absorption". His later work on the tribe-caste and tribe-peasant continua recognised that tribal communities could participate in wider civilizational processes while retaining distinctive ethnic identities. His use of the concept of *Diku*, for example, showed that tribal people could distinguish themselves from Hindu neighbours even while participating in cultural interaction (Sinha & Panchbhair, 1969). Thus, Sinha's civilizational perspective is best understood not as a simple theory of assimilation but as an attempt to explain the dynamic relationship between cultural integration and social differentiation.

Redfield distinguished between "folk" and urban societies and subsequently developed the distinction between the Great Tradition and Little Tradition. The Great Tradition referred broadly to literate, reflective, and institutionalised cultural traditions associated with centres of civilisation, while the Little Tradition referred to the localised cultural practices of communities and villages; Milton Singer and McKim Marriott subsequently applied this framework to India. Sinha, on the one hand, adopted some aspects of this conceptual framework but directed it particularly toward the study of India's tribal belt. His (Sinha, 1958) article argued that tribal cultures of peninsular India could be understood as dimensions of the Little Tradition of Indian civilisation. On the other hand, Sinha's formulation lies in its rejection of a strict opposition between "tribal" and "civilized" society.

Tribes were not simply survivals of a pre-civilizational past. They were part of the ancient systems of communication, trade, political ties and cultural participation. Civilisation must be seen as a dynamic process of interaction rather than as a static cultural formation controlled by a single hegemonic group or a single grand tradition. Sinha's civilisational perspective is undoubtedly inseparable from the intellectual legacy of S.C. Roy and Nirmal Kumar Bose. Sinha also shared Bose's concern with the historical unity and cultural interconnection of Indian society, but with a more complex perspective. Sinha (1965) instead emphasised continuums and transitional forms, rather than assuming the inevitable assimilation of indigenous cultures into Hindu civilisation.

His "tribe-caste and tribe-peasant continua" were, then, a substantial break with the assimilationist paradigm. That's distinction. Sinha saw "tribe" and "caste" as conceptual categories and not mutually exclusive factual categories. Actual communities may be at different points on a scale. Thus, Sinha's strategy fostered cultural integration and further divergence. A tribal society may adopt some caste traditions, agricultural methods, administrative institutions or religious rites, but still retain its ethnic identity. This was a major theoretical move away from a simplistic development from tribal to caste to peasant society and gave a more holistic framework linking this to modern society, uniting social anthropology and sociology.

Sinha's contribution was to show that the Little Tradition should not be regarded merely as a passive recipient of Great Tradition culture. As S.C. Roy argued, the relationship was interactive and reciprocal. Local communities interpreted, transformed, and localised wider cultural forms. Cultural elements circulating from centres of civilisation were therefore often modified to suit local social conditions. This approach also challenged the assumption that Indian civilisation was culturally homogeneous. Sinha emphasised the coexistence of different cultural systems within a broader civilizational framework; S.C. Roy's dialogical anthropology helped explain this unity in diversity. His work therefore attempted to reconcile civilizational unity with cultural diversity. Biswajit Ghosh (2023) argues that Sinha moved beyond a simple tribe-Hindu continuum and developed a more differentiated understanding of the relationship among tribe, caste, and peasant society. The tribe-caste-peasant continuum is arguably the most distinctive component of Sinha's civilizational perspective.

As we began this essay, conventional colonial anthropology often constructed "tribe" and "caste" as fundamentally different social categories. The tribe was represented as primitive, isolated and outside the caste system, whereas caste was treated as an institution characteristic of Hindu civilisation. But Sinha questioned such stringent distinctions. He argued that historical processes may change tribal tribes into farmer groups or caste-like structures, but certain aspects of tribal identity

might still persist. The relationship was therefore not necessarily one of complete replacement. This perspective also enabled Sinha to examine processes such as Hinduization, Sanskritization, *Rajputization* (Sinha, 1962) and state formation as interconnected historical processes. The *Bhumij*, for example, could be examined through changes in political status, cultural identification and relations with neighbouring Hindu populations (Sinha, 1957). This implies that civilizational change cannot be reduced to religious conversion or cultural imitation. Political power, agrarian transformation, social mobility and the formation of political elites are equally significant.

In short, Abhijit Guha's (2018) emphasises that Sinha's writings did not simply accept the idea of Hindu absorption. Guha points out that Sinha recognised continuing tribal identities and the possibility of political and social mobilisation among tribal communities (Guha, 2018). Thus, civilisation cannot be understood exclusively through religion, ritual or textual traditions. The development of states, political authority, and social stratification also forms part of the civilizational process; it is connected to the modern nation-state, a subject matter of sociology.

His study of Rajput myths and state formation shows that tribal societies could participate in complex political processes. Sinha's work demonstrated that political organisation could emerge within tribal regions and that tribal elites could participate in wider systems of political legitimacy (Sinha, 1962). Finally, like S.C. Roy and N.K. Bose, Sinha's (1971) civilizational approach was also methodological. He was concerned with Indian social anthropology's intellectual dependence on categories developed in Europe and North America. In "Is There an Indian Tradition in Social/Cultural Anthropology: Retrospect and Prospect?" (Sinha, 1971), he explicitly questioned whether Indian anthropology could develop an intellectual tradition rooted in its own historical and cultural experiences. His methodological position therefore involved a tension between indigenous intellectual categories and comparative social science. The objective was neither complete rejection of Western theory nor uncritical acceptance of it, but theoretical reconstruction through the study of Indian historical experience.

Sinha's enduring importance therefore lies less in providing a final model of Indian civilisation than in opening a methodological question: how can Indian society be understood through the historical relationships among its diverse communities without reducing difference to isolation or diversity to assimilation? His work on tribes, caste, peasantry, state formation and cultural traditions provides one of the important foundations from which this question can continue to be investigated. That is to say, though beyond the scope of this paper, his concern reflected a larger postcolonial problem: how can Indian society be studied without simply reproducing categories originally developed to classify it from outside?

### Concluding Remarks

The publication *Man in India* provides an essential viewpoint for understanding the evolution of not only Indian social anthropology but also Indian sociology in relation to the colonial intellectual context. Indian anthropology did not suddenly replace colonial anthropology with a distinct philosophical foundation; rather, it developed gradually, unevenly, and amid conflict. S. C. Roy, N. K. Bose, and Surajit Sinha exemplified different stages of this intellectual development, articulating a growing concern with understanding Indian civilisation within its distinct historical, cultural, and social contexts. S. C. Roy represents a cornerstone of this tradition. His contributions to traditional law, property rights, spiritual beliefs, kinship, social structure, and indigenous systems transformed anthropology from a mere classification endeavour to one focused on contextual comprehension. The establishment of *Man in India* in 1921 provided a structural framework for Indians to produce anthropological insights. Roy did not reject Western anthropology but rather assimilated, modified, and contextualised it. His nationalism was hence still subject to worldwide academic scrutiny. Roy's stance was laden with inconsistencies between tribal distinctiveness and national cohesion.

Subsequently, Ghurye and Bose re-examined these studies. Ghurye's Indological sociology concentrated on Brahmanical literary customs and the historical integration of tribes into Hindu civilisation. Bose delved deeper into Indian civilisation as a historical and social framework encompassing tribe, caste, economy, occupation, religion, and cultural exchange. Sinha complicates this paradigm by incorporating the concepts of the Little Tradition, tribe-caste continuity, and the tribe-peasant continuum. He demonstrated that participation in broader civilisational dynamics does not inherently obliterate tribal identity. Consequently, Roy, Bose, and Sinha embody a shift from depicting India to elucidating India via its historical connections. The shared legacy does not signify a total break from Western anthropology, but rather an epistemological discourse, institutional transformation, and theoretical contextualisation.

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### Notes

1. When I began my MPhil research in 2005, I had collected mostly only N.K. Bose and Sinha, along with other sociological articles, in hard copy from *Man in India*. Thanks to archive.org (see from onward; <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.532479/page/n5/mode/2up>)

for digitising the early version, and Serial Publication and ARF India for digitising later versions, which facilitated my research.

2. Social epistemology is the study of the ways in which social interactions, institutions, communities, and collective practices influence the production, justification, distribution, and validation of knowledge. It looks at the social conditions in which knowledge is produced through testimony, communication, expertise, power relations, and shared systems. Knowledge production is fundamentally social (Fuller, 1988; Goldman, 1999).

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