

BOOK REVIEWS

***Tribal Education and Health* by N.K. Vaid, Antim Publications, Delhi, 2025; Price: Rs. 102; Pp. 133; ISBN: 978-81-984385-8-4.**

Many books are written and published but few serve a large populace as most academic book, no matter of excellent quality rarely find a wide audience; unless they appeal to some felt need of a larger section of the society. One such example that comes to mind is of Ruth Benedict's *Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, about Japanese national character which became a best seller in Post- World War II, America as the American public was struggling to understand the formidable adversary, the Japanese. Another one was Margaret Mead's *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*, which dismantled the myth of a universal gender model and made women realize that 'Biology was not Destiny'. At the other end are the dubious publications which tend to provide students with a 'key' to answering questions and which often reproduce by rote some available statistics and stereotyped observations.

The present book does not fall into any of the above categories as it neither has the literary sweep of Benedict's or Mead's work, neither is it a dismissible work of dubious standard, catering to the needs of the less than average student. But what it has in common with both the above categories is that it is meant for a wide readership, not confined to the select academics and only meant as a 'library' book. The author of the book, N.K. Vaid has been running an institution which trains Indian Administrative Service aspirants in the discipline of anthropology, a subject that was introduced into the Civil Services by the doyen of Indian anthropology, L.P Vidyarthi. This book is meant for the aspirants and also for any other student of anthropology. Focusing on tribal health and education, the book is not just a mindless compilation of various acts and policies, which is what one mostly finds in such books but an intelligently compiled and critically evaluated collection of data both from official sources and from first hand ethnographic field research. As the author has made clear, he has gone through hundreds of such reports relying ultimately only on those that he found truthful and reliable. While reading the book, one is convinced that this is indeed so, as the observations are close to the reality that one, as an anthropologist has often observed.

The book is not without academic merit as it has made use of critical works in the domain of education and health to analyze and interpret the reality as well as make critical evaluation of the existing policies and their implementation. For example, one observation as well as suggestion that is made in this book is that

there is no official policy for providing adequate nutrition to children from the age of six months to three years, that is the pre-school time, when the child is not going to any institution and is therefore not part of any meal system. But this is the time that is most crucial for getting adequate nutrition as the brain fully develops by the age of five and early deprivation leads to less functional adults who then become a burden rather than assets to society. The author pleads for a systematic intervention in terms of adequate childhood nutrition so that children can become healthy adults in both mind and body.

The book also reveals the dismal state of public education in the country, and especially in tribal areas. He quotes reports by IAS officers and other NGOs about the complete inadequacy of the education, which is often non-existent as teachers, otherwise fully qualified, take no interest in the education of the so-called 'primitive' tribals. The fact of prejudice against the marginal sections of society by those belonging to upper castes and classes is a reality that I, as a field anthropologist have seen time and again. In this book it is observed that most tribal children in advanced classes are barely literate. Which is a truism, as I have been told by teachers in remote tribal village schools that they are officially instructed not to fail the students, so they let them pass, irrespective of whether they know anything or not. In one village in Rajasthan, one day there was a huge commotion in the village where most villagers had gathered outside the school demanding to beat up the teachers. On being asked, they said that even if one student in class eighth could recite the Hindi alphabet, they would take back their agitation. In this book, Vaid has not simply given the policies and programs but supplemented them with critical observations collected from the field by various agencies. He has also had the courage to tell the truth.

One will hope that having been trained in such an institution as run by the author of this book, the IAS officers would be sensitive to the realities of hierarchy, exploitation and deprivation of the marginalized people of this country. They would treat the tribals and humans and potential contributors to the progress of the nation. Vaid is not sympathetic to the westernized point of view of what education should be. He also criticizes the present-day education system as a product of the colonial era and suggests that one may go back to the educational system prevalent in the pre-British times since at that time the ethics of education was to create wisdom and not simply administrators who could work under supervision of higher authorities. He advocates for an education that creates an independent rather than a subservient mind and such education was available in the indigenous systems prevalent in India. He has also pointed to the gross negligence of tribal students in the tribal boarding schools. The book does not however make any attempt to go into the larger issues of educational philosophies and academic debates but remains focused on the ground on the actual workings of the state provided health and educational policies and actual implementation of the same.

The book works at three levels, one, it provides a list and description of the actual policies, Acts etc. Secondly it provides a critical assessment of their implementation on the ground and thirdly, it provides a critical analysis of the flaws inherent in the policies and the Acts. It is extremely useful for those preparing for IAS as it not only provides the basic data but also gives critical insight and suggestions for improvement with the hope that some IAS qualifiers may take up these issues.

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***Power Politics and Corruption* by Amitabha Sarkar (Ed.), Agama Kala Prakashan, Delhi, 2025; Price: Rs.2200; Pp. xviii+291; ISBN:978-93-92556-71-5,**

The book under review is a collection of twelve papers, besides an Introduction that introduces the readers to a burning contemporary issue on 'Corruption' and its association with Power Politics' which is apparent in almost all sections of populations in our country. On the basis of anthropological approach, both long and short term, the contributors have unfolded the persistence of 'corruption' beyond the economic sphere, in the social-cultural arena, irrespective of their ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Eight papers directly address the issues of 'corruption, power politics' on the basis of empirical as well as secondary relevant data generated from West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar, Assam, Manipur, Uttarakhand and Jammu & Kashmir. Remaining four papers have different issues for discussion.

Editor's 'Introduction' to the volume outlines a comprehensive account on the recent social and political situations in terms of the focal theme of the book, against the backdrop of diverse ways of life as depicted in each of the twelve articles.

Papers from eastern India includes a field-based work from the '*Junglemahal*' in West Bengal that at certain stages remained a place of, what is known as '*Maobadi*' activities. The authors of the paper underline factor like long history of exploitation and deprivation that the inhabitants of this area, mostly the 'Scheduled Tribes' and 'Backward Communities' have experienced resulted in emergence of severe discontent. This prepared a favourable environment for the '*Maobadis*' to carry on their extremist activities. The paper from Odisha points out how the authorities in power in the State level politics misusing political power denying the Pano (Kui Domanga) from getting 'Scheduled Tribe' status, though they share all the required cultural, religious, political attributes like those of their neighbouring Kandh/Kondh, who enjoy the status of 'Scheduled Tribe'. The author apprehends; this deprivation may in long run generate social unrest in the area. The third paper from eastern region contains in-depth discussion on the multiple facts of interwoven nature of power, politics and corruption that remain a central issue in day-to-day life of the peoples of Jharkhand and Bihar. Anthropological analysis of political developments in these two States have led the author to infer that the level of corruption among the highly placed politicians have become inseparable phenomenon. Readers of this paper, probably would share the author's expression of disappointment 'in many ways we shall have to perhaps learn to live with corruption since it has taken root'.

Two papers on the issues of contemporary concern like insurgency, corruption and ethnic violence take the readers to a very sensitive as well as complex cultural situation in Manipur.

Genesis of corruption and insurgency has been viewed in historical perspective. Close examination on these two areas of peoples' concern has led the author of the paper "*Corruption, Culture and Insurgency: Two narratives in Manipur*" to infer that 'the root cause of insurgency is not a problem of corruption or development or regional discrepancy in India'. He opines that 'in collective mind of the people, state is a system of corruption and insurgency is anti-corruption'. However, many individuals change their stand as per their interest, they pay bribes when required; they also hate the culture of corruption'. This ground reality of behavioural patterns led the author to trace functioning of two different mind-sets that he termed as 'ambivalent attitude' and response of the people towards two sets situations.

Most recent and still ongoing ethnic violence in Manipur is focus of another paper "*Manipur Violence: Diplomatic Policy, Customary Law and Social Demography*", which underlines needs of anthropological analysis of ethnic history of a region that claims to be homeland of peoples of multiple cultural backgrounds. Most of the tribes of the Hills and Valley draw their cultural linkages with the ethnic groups of the neighbouring country. The paper establishes importance of looking deep into the social cultural factors like the customary laws, drastic change in demographic situation on account of illegal migration, role of power and politics, for a better understanding of persistence of ethnic violence.

A review paper "*Towards a Political Anthropology for North East India*" examines diverse issues and many dimensions of ethnic movements that once occurred and still occurring in the region. The author has underlined the major issues like 'consequences of homogenization', 'hegemony', and 'social exclusion' that work towards emergence of a number of 'ethnic identity' movements. Significance of customary laws enacted through '*Biradari Panchayat*' in regulating 'corruption' 'crime' and 'punishment' as perceived by the tribe Buksa of Uttarakhand and its decline of importance in the face of modern systems of governance like statutory *Panchayat* has been identified as the cause of growth of conflicting social situations at many stages since perception of 'corruption', crime and punishment' do not fit into each other's systems of governance. Last article in this volume "*Power, Corruption and Identity in Rural Governance: An Ethnographic Study*" takes a reader to a complex cultural situation in the village '*Mala Buchan*' of Baramula district in Kashmir. The reader learns that 'corruption' has spread its roots deep in the behavioural patterns, even in a society that follows Islamic faith which preaches acceptance of 'bribe' as a 'corruption and also a crime'. The Muslim populations in the village who have two distinct social and economic levels rationalize practice of 'corruption', in author's word, 'necessary evil to negotiate bureaucratic inefficiencies. Overtime, 'corruption' ceased to be seen as an ethical failure and instead became a practical tool for survival'.

The reader also comes across several social-cultural-political issues linked to each other those have been examined by the authors closely in understanding reasons of persistence of corruption in such a society. The paper reestablishes significance of prolong and close observations in unfolding the nuances of cultural systems that go on compromising with the external facts, usually believed to be 'evils' for their sustenance.

I am sure that this volume "*Power, Politics and Corruption*" will be useful to the scholars of not only of Anthropology and other Social Sciences, others interested in various ethnic unrests, occurred or occurring in diverse ethnopolitical environments in a vast country like India will find it interesting and educative. The Editor deserves compliments for planning such a volume of contemporary relevance and arranging contributions of expert scholars from all over India within the two covers of this book.

The volume is a welcome addition to the body of knowledge in the field of Anthropology and other Social Sciences.

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***Dhobis of Delhi – An Urban Ethnography from the Margins, 1974-2023* by Subhadra Mitra Channa, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2024; Price: 1495; Pp.254; ISBN: 9780198926207.**

The study of so called ‘untouchable’ service castes has a rich tradition, although the number of studies done among these communities is handful. As early as in 1969, T.R. Singh did a study on the Madiga community. Singh (1969) mentioned that the leather working caste of Madiga of Telangana was identified with carrion eating and variously known as *Panchama*, *Acchut*, *Asprushyulu*, *Dalit-jati* etc. Louis Dumont studied a south Indian sub-caste Piramalai Kallar. He mentions, ‘In Tamil, ... Kallar means ‘thief’ and the Kallar are so considered.’ (Dumont, 1986,10). These studies promoted a kind of sub-disciplinary specialization named ‘Anthropology of Dalit’ (Damodaran, 2024; Bandyopadhyay, 2024). Interposed between these two major studies on the ‘untouchable’ Dalit, the present work on another ‘untouchable’ service caste of washermen presents a very different understanding of the situation in which the overarching ‘Dalit’ category is not being accepted by a community conceived as such in a more common-sense approach. Besides, carving this unique niche for itself, the study also cross-cuts a number of specialized inquiries often glossed with several sub-disciplinary categories such as urban ethnography, reflective and reflexive ethnographies, re-study and caste studies. In essence, this is a quintessentially contemporary ethnography of community, that reflects the very substance of anthropological and social science engagements of a formidable scholar over a considerable period of time.

The author’s interest in the Dhobi community of Old Delhi is dated to the 1970s when she first visited their settlement in connection with her doctoral research. Her curiosity about the people did not decline even after a long time as she continued her engagement with their lives till 2019. In this sense it is a restudy, but in the line of Redfield who conducted his research in Tepoztlán through a revisit with almost some fresh agenda. Similarly, Professor Channa’s present work differed significantly with her past investigation which was more informed by economic anthropological orientation. Here, she has admittedly taken a critical as well as reflexive approach. In brief, the work has a prime objective of studying the adaptation and survival of the Dhobis in a city which is expanding and transforming.

The book has seven chapters apart introduction. The Dhobis of Old Delhi has been the subject of discussion in the first chapter. The second chapter deals with the social world of the Dhobis. In this social system, the *jati* and *biradari* play an important role as *biradari* identity is connected with the perpetuation of their occupation and society. It is interesting to see how the concept of neighbourhood is getting more and more important in their social world. In the third chapter, livelihood,

resources and strategies for survival have been described with ethnographic details. It can be pointed out that the distinction of space is marked with regard to rural and urban dhobis. It is apparent with the reference to the dhobis who used to do subsistence agriculture in the rural areas migrated to the urban centers to work under the more prosperous dhobis there. In the trade, there are different types of establishments which are engaged in washing clothes. Besides, individually managed family level enterprise of the washermen, there are big 'dry-cleaning' set ups often owned and run by the non-dhobi comparatively wealthy castes who do not perform the task themselves. Rather they engage the caste dhobis to do the actual cleaning. In a sense, the dhobi-work has remained by and large caste-based, however, the nature of operation has considerably changed with the passage of time. A slow or rather less occupational shift is noticed among them unlike the cases of other service or professional castes. Chapter four is about the 'Living Life as a Dhobi'. The author of the book mentions that she is attempting to describe the life of the real individuals whom she met and meets on a regular basis. I think it is obvious that an ethnographic text particularly of this type always does so. The description is infused with an intimate feel of the everyday life ordinary caste dhobis (both men and women) undergo to eke out their survival. Side by side, the life cycle rites of the dhobis are narrated in this chapter. Here, it is seen that the middle-class values have made inroads into the lives of these dhobi people. The author did not notice any overt patriarchy in the everyday life of the dhobis. In fact, the custom of bride-price seems to be indicated in the study, which is quite unlikely for a caste society which is gradually accepting upper-caste values and behaviour, and soon the matter may turn in favour of dowry with the economic transformation in place. In spite of that it has to be admitted that the dhobis are quite conscious about their identity and continuation of *baradari*. The religious background of the social life has been the topic of discussion in the chapter five which is titled as 'Negotiating Power in the Realm of the Sacred'. It is interesting to note that sufism had a considerable influence upon them. But the dhobis consider Sham Khatu as their patron deity. The myth associated with the creation of this deity offers a interesting religious position which makes a critique of Brahminical doctrine. Besides, this we notice growing popularity of Sai Baba among them. It is reported that the Sheheri dhobis now follow Nagar Sain Baba as their presiding deity. The social transformation has underlined a shift from *baradari* to *samaj* as Professor Channa indicated. But I think it is more at a discursive level and strategic one. However, their activities seem to have increased their visibility. With these performances, they display a phenomenon that counters Srinivas' thesis on the social-cultural transformation in Indian society. In my opinion, this is a very significant and original argument of Professor Channa's book that marks the departure from Srinivas' concept of social change in modern India. Another contribution of this work lies in its critique of the

indiscriminate 'dalitisation' of the so-called untouchable communities one like the dhobis. The dhobis themselves do not subscribe the use of the term Dalit. However, I hope that some future studies will delve deep into the complex relationship between Dalit and untouchability since the present study did not much elaborate on the issue.

The study also opens up a discussion on the urban space and accommodation of some traditional occupational groups. In this regard, Channa's observation is worth mentioning:

'The blind adoption of a modern (read Western) model of development and the ignoring of all indigenous institutions as regressive have created more economic pressure and put an unfair burden on the state that is expected to provide jobs for everyone in a densely populated country.' (p.214)

This observation is enough to pave the way for more future probes in this direction. In this way, this book appears to me a multifaceted discourse beyond its stated objectives and cross cuts a number of interrelated domains of anthropological research. For this reason, I recommend a close reading of the book by the faculties and students of anthropology and other social science disciplines.

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