

INGENIOUS, ALTERNATIVE, INDIAN: ANTHROPOLOGY OF BAIDYANATH SARASWATI

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Abstract: Professor McKim Marriott indicated one anomaly in social sciences researches in India regarding the use of western ideas in Indian situations and called for an ethnosocial science. Acknowledging Marriott with characteristic humility, Saraswati reminded us that the Indian stalwarts like S.C. Roy and N.K Bose had similar appeal to posterity. The later development of anthropology in India has made it clear that Professor Baidyanath Saraswati was the most prominent practitioner in this direction. Saraswati began his anthropological journey with the study of material culture and gradually drifted towards the studies of social organizations of Indian civilization and religion which ultimately culminated in the exploration of senses and more ethereal aspects of Indian society and culture. His philosophically informed approach took him to the understanding of mind through indigenous categories. As a result, we get cosmic anthropological principles which according to him is the very alternative paradigm of Indian anthropology. In this discussion, we shall try to locate the major areas of Saraswati's works, the conceptual categories he proposed to understand culture and society, and the cosmological narrative he built for the anthropological studies. My argument here is that Saraswati had an ingenious mind that expanded the scope of his imagination towards a kind of reflective anthropology. Uttering not a single word about post-modern theory or methodology, Saraswati paved the way for a more nuanced, subjective, and phenomenological turn in the discipline for grasping the realities in the field beyond the conventional methods followed after Malinowski. Critically looking at his contribution one may say that he was singularized by his venture in his time wading into the studies which had a few takers. Secondly, in dealing with the Indian situation, did he appropriate the tribal communities in the Indian civilization glossing the uniqueness they portray? We shall try to find answers to these questions in our discourse with regard to larger socio-political context in which our discipline is situated.

Keywords: Ethnosociology, Indian civilization, Alternative, Cosmo-cultural Principle, Baidyanath Saraswati.

The Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts (IGNCA) organized a session in the 14th International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences held in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1998 which had a theme with subtitle 'The 21st Century: Future of Anthropology'. In that session, the objective was to search for

the alternative paradigms in Anthropology for the study of man and culture. The scholars who presented their paper in the session explored the possibilities of applying the indigenous understanding derived from their respective studies of man and culture and to interrogate the western vision of anthropology for the study of society in India. Here, Baidyanath Saraswati (2001) commented that anthropology had caused a misunderstanding of the universal nature of culture. Therefore, as he premised, the search for new paradigms is a cultural imperative. It is known; Social Science Research Council (SSRC) resolved in its meeting in 1976 that the development of South Asian conceptual systems in all fields of the humanities and social sciences would be encouraged. In early 1980s, the idea of an ethnosociology was mooted in the meeting at the American Anthropological Association under the leadership of Michael Moffatt. Later he organised a workshop on the same theme in Madison in 1984. McKim Marriott and A. K. Ramanujan were actively involved in this venture of proposing and propagating ethnosociological understanding of Indian society and culture. We know that a number of CIS dedicated to this topic was published in 1989. Later McKim Marriott edited a volume out of these publications with some additions, which came out as *India through Hindu Categories* (Marriott, 1990). But this was not the beginning of the approach to carve out a distinct Indian Anthropology or an Anthropology which is conceptually grounded in India for understanding her people and culture. It was Sarat Chandra Roy, called 'Father of Indian Ethnography' who pointed out the distinction between Indian and western Anthropology. He was of opinion that the western Anthropology has a *posteriori* objective scientific method. In contrast to this, he highlighted 'the subjective and synthetic methods emphasized by the Arya Rsis of ancient India' (Roy, 1986, 87; originally published in 1937.) He further stated:

"From our Indian view-point the ulterior object of the Science of Science is, or should be, to understand the meaning and goal of human existence, - the trend, direction and aim of human culture and civilization, - the eternal spiritual reality behind life and society, the *Sat* behind the *Asat*, and to ascertain, as far as possible, the laws that govern the thought and behaviour of man in Society." (Roy, 1986, 81)

Roy considered the Vedas, the epics of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, Smritishastra, Puranas as great sources of anthropological literature. He wanted to develop an Indian tradition of anthropology that would combine western objective methodology and Indian synthetic approach coupled with subjective understanding. But his clarion call for such an insightful methodology remained a distant cry for years till Saraswati took it up seriously. In this regard, Saraswati was also influenced by N.K. Bose whom he paid highest level of respect. Beteille has commented that

Bose 'presented with an account of the theory and practice of Hindu social life as these were set down in some of the principal classical texts' (Beteille, 1975, 2 cited in Bose, 1975[1949]). Bose conceptualised culture as an organic unity of its own which was brought out by the intimate inter-relationship of its components that include 'material equipment' (*vastu*), 'habitual action' (*kriya*), 'social organization' (*samhati*), and 'abstract ideas' (*tattwa*) which merge to produce a 'complex whole' by which individuals of a community live (Bose, 1961[1929], Bhattacharjee, 2008). I find these categorisation elements of culture by Bose had a profound but subtle effect on Saraswati. If we try to follow the trajectory of his works, it becomes evident that he started with a focus on material culture (*vastu*) study with its technical aspects (*kriya*) gradually moved to the study of Indian civilization (*samhati*) and finally arrived at a higher level of understanding (*tattwa*) with his cosmo-cultural principles of anthropology. But he never lost sight of the complex inter-relation exists within an organic whole that is culture. Now we shall map these major locations of his academic journey through anthropology with a career spanning over half of a century.

Study of Pottery techniques

Baidyanath Saraswati remarks that 'It is, perhaps, no exaggeration to say that the cultural history of mankind is the history of pottery-making cultures' (Saraswati, 1979, ix). In 1959, Professor Nirmal Kumar Bose launched a project on all India material culture trait survey under the aegis of Anthropological Survey of India with an objective of determining the culture of zones of India. Young Baidyanath, who came to Kolkata with a letter of introduction from Professor Sacchidananda, was warmly welcomed by Bose. Saraswati became a part of team of the project conceived to survey about three dozen of material traits across the country. He along with Naba Krishna Behura concentrated on the study of pottery. Later he did his Ph.D. under Professor Sacchidananda on *The Peasant Potters of North India* in 1967. Professor Saraswati mentions that he visited 222 villages spread across 74 districts in 12 states of the country in connection with his study on the pottery (Saraswati, 1979).

N. K. Bose propositioned a pyramidal structure in understanding unity in the Indian civilization. According to him, this structure of unity can be compared with the structure of a pyramid. Like pyramid, it has a greater differentiation at the material base of life and culture, and it tappers with the lessening of differentiation as one moves higher with social and spiritual/philosophical aspects of culture. Bose established this theoretical assumption methodologically at the synchronic level with the study of culture trait survey referred to above. Saraswati's work drawing

inspiration from it, expanded this model by proving it diachronically with his study on the potters and pottery-making culture in India.

Saraswati (1979) organised his work on the potters and pottery into three major parts dealing with technical aspects of the potter craft ('Potter Craft'), social organization of the craft ('Potter Caste') and relationship of pottery-making culture with Indian civilization. Under potter craft section, his discussion was focused on three dimensions, productive techniques dealing with the process of making pottery, tools and implements of production with special reference to potter's wheel and productive organization. The part two which is titled 'Potter Caste' includes discussion on peasant potters, social structure, religious aspects and Moslem potters. He starts the discussion on the etymological root of the term for potter (*Kumbhakar* or *Kulal*) in India to show the historical connections across region even between North and South India. On the basis of painstaking and meticulous enumeration, he comes to conclude that 'the potter caste or pottery-making cultures in North India are divided into two cultural blocks: one formed by the potters of northern and northwestern India and other by the potters of Central India' (Saraswati, 1979, 78). On the Moslem potters, he made an interesting observation that this group continued to practice some of their religious ethos after their conversion from Hindu faith to Islam. Therefore, the aesthetic and technical aspects of the crafts of the artisans do not correspond to their social and religious organization in India.

As we scan his writings in the early years of his academic career, we notice a very meticulous depiction of the material culture. He obviously related material trait to other dimensions namely social and religious ones following an anthropological orientation towards holistic understanding. The issues of relationship between crafts/craftsmen and castes, along with social change with regard to pottery-making were dealt with in a pan-Indian context (Saraswati, 1963). He has given examples that certain potters play specialized roles such as priests in Pidari and Ayanar temples, officiating of funeral rites in south Canara, or makers of special ritual objects as seen in Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat or Bihar. This relationship therefore means that the potters' role is not just confined to fixed caste position for the making of material items, but also embedded in the social fabric in multifarious ways. The change and occupational mobility should be understood with reference to different craftsmen groups. The impact of government schemes would be fruitful if these were suited to local context and adaptable.

Saraswati's study on pottery is seen to evolve in the later years more in line with his more cosmologically oriented theoretical stance (Saraswati, 1989). To explain the Indian vision of technology, he drew upon the example of Gujarati potters who believe in the divine origin of their wheel. The elements which characterise

potters' craft represent the Indian view of technology. Its features state that – i) the knowledge of the craft rests in transcendence, divinely ordered, ii) it should be life-affirming, iii) it will have aesthetic value, iv) it has to be simple and less than human (controllable by human), v) it addresses the minimal needs, vi) it operates in a non-competitive manner, vii) it ultimately leads to divinity (it is believed that the potters perform the act of god in his archetypal role of God Prajapati).

Organization of Indian Civilization

The study of Indian civilization has been approached by Saraswati from different dimensions. Study of potters and pottery-making cultures, although discussed here separately, is actually an investigation of the multiple entanglements of material culture with the complex civilizational whole. Besides this, he worked on 'sacred complex', ascetics, temple organization, learning tradition etc. to gain insight of the nature of Indian society and culture.

In order to understand Saraswati's view on Indian civilization, we have to know how he conceptualised the 'tradition' and organization of culture in India. It is to be added here that he made significant departure from Redfieldian view in conceptualizing 'tradition' and contributed to the formulation of model of Indian civilization adding uniquely to the existing model proposed by Nirmal Kumar Bose. Saraswati states that *dharma* means cultural tradition, not religion. For example, *Varnasharama Dharma* is actually the following of the Varna system and *Ashrama* stages in life. Here, *dharma* denotes a specific way of living. The culture which was originated and flourished in India from time immemorial is the 'Sanatan Dharma'. He further stated:

“Hindu' does not emerge as a category either in the ritualistic tradition or in the secular traditional identification in such critical contexts as marriage, inheritance, food, and occupation. It is, indeed, an official category persisting as the legacy of the foreign rule. First were the Moslem rulers to use the term Hindu for those native peoples of India who were not converted into the Islamic faith.” (Saraswati, 1986, 199)

Following this understanding, he included tribal traditions within the ambit of Sanatan Dharma. Regarding tribe's location in Indian civilization, he elsewhere discussed it elaborately how tribe can be understood with reference to society and culture in India (Saraswati, 1991). He told us that modern society conceived tribe as a separate humanity. He added that tribe was indistinguishable in the traditional *varna-jati* system in India until the British administrators separated them from the rest of the population. Saraswati seemed to have agreed to Surajit Chandra Sinha's view on the tribe-vis-à-vis Indian civilization, in which Sinha postulated an

orthogenetic growth of civilization in India from a tribal cultural base. Consequently, he did not consider the tribe as the 'other' in Indian culture. He concluded that there was nothing in traditional Indian thought to corroborate the evolutionary anthropological notion of tribe. This, I think, explains the relative absence of the separate treatment of tribe in his model of Indian Civilization. Now let us see how Saraswati conceptualised the structure of this civilization.

Inverted Tree

Saraswati conceptualised the idea of Indian civilization with a metaphor of *inverted tree* borrowed from *Katha Upanishada* (Saraswati, 1986b). Initially, he referred to the *Kalpa Vriskhsa* from *Markandeya Purana*, a mythical tree that was believed to provide with all sorts of sustenance to the people. Later, he mentioned of Vedas, the ancient source of knowledge got divided into numerous branches and sectoral traditions. Therefore, the roots remained at the top. Thus, the structure of the Sanatani culture is like an inverted tree the roots of which are upward and branches downward. It bears flowers in its roots, but bears fruits all over. The idea here is that the Sanatani people trace the roots of their traditions in transcendence through revelation heard from above (*shruti*). Then it is developed enormously in time and space through the *smritis* which is remembered by the people. This tree blossoms into scriptures bearing fruits of knowledge inexhaustibly to the present day.

Nature of Culture, not bipolar

Saraswati conceived culture 'as a depositary class bearing within itself a deposit of knowledge of wide varieties, accumulated in time and place.' (Saraswati, 1986b, 206) The cultures, unlike bipolar *little* and *great traditions*, are of three basic types: *Loukik* (oral), *Sastriya* (Textual), and *Naivrittika* (Transcendental). It is grossly clear from the nomenclature that the mode of transmission in *Loukik* tradition is oral. Here the life of the people is guided by oral testimony and the collective memory. Their technological knowledge and skills, social rules, rituals, their entire code of behaviour is unwritten *lokachara*, however, their society is functioning through an overarching model of *sastrachara* (textual tradition). Peasant potters of India bear the tradition of *Loukik* tradition. The textual culture (*sastriya*) as the name suggests is based on reliance in and the authority of the *sastra* (textual scripture). The Brahmanic culture is an example of the textual tradition in which the occupation is guided by the *Dharmasastra*. The rules of marriage, inheritance of property, domestic rituals follow the *sastra*. On the other hand, the members of *Naivrittika* culture are the specialists who cultivate transcendental knowledge.

They have renounced the worldly life of the householders (*grihastha*). The ancient *Risis* epitomise the ideal of *Naivrattika* culture.

Sacred Complex

L. P. Vidyarthi's concept of 'Sacred Complex' made a great impact on the academic landscape of anthropology contributing significantly to the study of Indian Civilization. Saraswati took interest in studying the 'sacred complex' of Kashi with Vidyarthi and Makhan Jha (Vidyarthi, Saraswati, and Jha, 1978). Besides this, he published a number of papers on sacred complex in journals and edited volumes (Saraswati, 1972; 1978; 1979; 1986c). Moreover, his engagement with 'sacred complex' got manifested in his work on the 'sacred city' Kashi (Saraswati, 1975) and on the ascetic of Kashi (Sinha and Saraswati, 1978). The idea of microcosm which was later elaborated in the study of sacred complex of Kashi with Vidyarthi and Jha had been expounded with reference to Indian civilization and tradition of Hinduism. Here we come across the concept of *Nilakantha* which embodied metaphorically the nature of the city as well as the Indian civilization itself. Saraswati discussed the continuity of cultural tradition as well as sacred tradition of Kashi. The guardians of this tradition include ascetics – Sannyasi, Pundits, Ghatias, Panda, Gumusta, Bhaddar, Yatrawal, Kathabachak, Keertanias, Anusthanis, Karmakandi, artists and craftsmen, Rajas and dhanapatis. There exist varieties of sacred tradition with regard to shrines, performances – oral, textual, tirtha yatra, pindadana. He postulated the sacred-secular continuum contrasting with the sacred-profane dichotomy of Durkheim. The sacred has been termed as a kind of 'industry' also. Referring to the study of Sacred Complex of Kashi (Vidyarthi, Saraswati, and Jha, 1978), Jha wrote (Jha, 1991, 70):

“Again, it would be the re-appraisal of the concept which would be most desirable for understanding the different aspects of Indian civilization. For such a study in India Kashi was the most appropriate place of pilgrimage, which has been called the "Microcosm" of Indian Civilization, and has been studied recently by Vidyarthi, Saraswati and Jha (1978). Kashi has been considered as a more complex sacred centre so far as the continuity, co-existence and varieties of sacred traditions are concerned.

The study of "Sacred Complex" of Kashi has further revealed that the trichotomic elements viz., the sacred geography, the sacred performances and the sacred specialists, have wider application in the study of Hindu places of pilgrimage as a dimension of Indian civilization. Again, out of these inter-related trichotomic phenomena, the sacred geography, when considered both in time and space, demonstrates the continuity of India's great and little traditions, and the process of compromise and combination operating between them. The ecological settings

of the sacred centres of Kashi and analysis thereof, lead us to conclude that there is a textual and contextual continuity in the Tirthas of India, which may be called an all-India pattern of sacred centres in the context of Indian civilization.”

Therefore, the study helped us to understand a pan-Indian structure of sacred complex.

His another very interesting study on pilgrimage to the Hindu *tirthas* reflected the model of sacred complex (Saraswati, 1983). I have discussed it later with reference to the discussion on pilgrimage.

Study of Art and Aesthetics

Art and aesthetics have attracted much attention of Professor Saraswati. He has some interesting publications in this domain. His particular focus was directed towards rock art or aboriginal art; however, he paid attention to poetry, aesthetics etc. As early as in 1978, he published an article in *Man In India*, which dealt with anthropological approach to poetry (Saraswati, 1978). For him, the ‘proper perspective for anthropological understanding of Indian poetry, whether primitive or classical, is to view it in the context of sacred.’ (ibid, 193) He elaborated this argument with examples from the Kabirian poetries which the followers of medieval poet-saint had composed in the name of their *guru*. It is a ‘cultural phenomenon’ for anthropology. At one end poetry is attached to the nature, on the other hand it is identified with the cosmos so far as the verses of the Vedic Rishis are concerned. However, this understanding of poetry is not uniform across cultures. He mentions that the poetry in the primitive¹ societies is not personal, it is part of their corporate life. There can be no bad or good poetry. The primitive or folk poetries are collective and anonymous as he said. With the difference in perception of the society in the classical cultures which consider human as ‘essentially a spiritual being caught up in the bondage of *maya*, seeking his own personal salvation’ (ibid, 195), the understanding of poetry is different. Here, it is more of a personal matter. The ritual language is encoded in classical poetries. In contrast to both ‘primitive’ and ‘classical’ poetries, the ‘modern’ poetry is ‘an expression of total denial of all the traditional forms and ideas that take man into the realm of transcendence’ (ibid, 198). He refers to the discussion of the poems of 19th Century German poet Friedrich Holderlin by Martin Heidegger who held that true poetry acts as a vessel of the holy. Saraswati noticed similar other-worldly sentiment in the Kabirian poems. He came to conclude that the ‘proper context of poetry is not the language’ but sacred (ibid, 203).

In approaching art of the aboriginal people, Saraswati emphasised on its content (Saraswati, 1994). He discussed the Australian aboriginal art which was

¹ The word ‘primitive’ is being used here after Saraswati.

sacred by nature. He studied the rock art of Australian tribes. He further discussed about rock art of India and China. In fact, he was instrumental in organizing a global conference on rock art at the IGNCA in 1993. For him, rock art is a universal expression. About which he wrote:

“The universality of rock art lies in its primal vision of space, time, object, person and arrangements, through a five-fold kairological moment in human consciousness, viz., revelation, expression, reflection, identification, and tradition. It can be examined, interpreted and demonstrated by a method that I call 'diachronic hermeneutics', which is a three-fold step: first, enter into the present context of traditional arts; second; move backward in time to rock art; and third, construct a dialogical frame in which the visual text and the traditional contexts are compared. Its proper context is cosmography, the kairological art, on which all the arts in the traditional world are hung. What makes the rock art essentially universal is the diversity of its forms, making a pluralistic worldview, in which the cosmic dimension is realized.” (Saraswati, 1993, 17)

The same concept of ‘primal vision’ is also hinted at his discussion of Australian rock art. Another important aspect is the ‘Kairological’ nature of art. By kairological, a divine chronological frame is indicated. Here, art becomes a form of sacred expression. Saraswati also cites examples from the Rathva and the Saora painters who consider the act of painting as the ‘reading’ of God. He actually conceived different forms of artistic expressions as interwoven tapestry of a divine design which interconnects dance, songs and painting. These art forms enact the five-fold process of kairological moment as conceptualised by Saraswati to include human consciousness as enlivened through revelation, expression, reflection, identification, and tradition.

Saraswati was pained by the decline of aesthetic tradition. He did not consider it only a loss of artistic skill or expression rather it is a breakdown of traditional culture (Saraswati, 1986a). In the article, written in a style of anthropological notebook, he cited examples from Naga shawl, Buddhist art objects or Khasi dance (ibid). For him, traditional art is becoming an ‘experience industry’ losing its very soul. He states that the de-contextualization of art leads to a ‘crisis in aesthetic culture’.

Cosmological Anthropology: The Cosmo-cultural Principles

Pilgrimage Study

The study of pilgrimage by Saraswati represents an explication of his method of cosmological anthropology. He contributed a number of papers on pilgrimage. However, his study of pilgrimage initially followed the model of sacred complex.

But with the evolving theoretical orientation of Saraswati, it took a 'cosmological turn'. The idea of scared geography is reflected in the conceptualization of *tirtha*, *kshetra*, *mandala*, *peetha*. The sacred performances included *yatra*, *kshetra-sannyasa*, *Garbha-basa*, *kalpa-basa*, *pindadan* etc involving sacred performers like *tirtha yatri*, *panda*, *purohit*, *sannyasi* etc. (Saraswati, 1983).

Saraswati (2009) postulated the 'sacred theory of pilgrimage' which was based on four main pillars - Cosmic principle, Life principle, Organizing principle and Transforming Principle. He stated that the theory of pilgrimage had its root in the conception of Brahman, the ever-expanding universe. He comes to conclude seven *sutras* of pilgrimage which is primarily built upon the cosmo-cultural logic which he advocated for the study of anthropology. To him, pilgrimage may be defined as a 'cosmic drama of which God, animal and man are the actors and earth is the theatre' (Saraswati, 2009, 27). Movement of pilgrim is like the moving of celestial objects around other objects like sun, moon or earth. Therefore, it can be said that the ideas of Saraswati were gradually becoming more engaged with the cosmo-cultural or cosmological principles that he took up as the essence of anthropological study in Indian context. This ingenious idea forms the alternative model for the study of Indian Anthropology from the ethnosociological perspective which I referred to in the beginning and called for by the doyens of Indian Anthropology like S.C. Roy and N.K. Bose. His idea of the cosmic principle of anthropological study is most beautifully depicted in his book *Culture and Cosmos* (2004). Here the entire living universe, order of nature, sound, space, time and mind are integrated. The cosmic anthropological principle thus consists of Manu Principle – one as many, man as microcosm, science as society where theodicy is cosmodicy, here mind is cosmos, word constitutes the world, knowledge as experience is tantamount to culture, nature as culture, ritual as language and traditions act as hiero-history. The principle is again a set of principles – unification principle, ecological principle, ordering principle and transcending principle.

Conclusion

The review of Professor Baidyanath Saraswati's works reveals that they exhibit features of phenomenological understanding. It appears that we need to enliven all our senses to get to the essence of things. Therefore, his anthropology is more empathic. He used the conceptual categories of the Indian people to understand the Indian civilization and culture. He tried to amalgamate scientific approach with subjective understanding. He believes that the western categories would not fit to the cultural notions of the people of India. He himself has shown how we understand our universe through our own categories. Anthropology is a study of

how humans make meaning of the world and survive with this meaning-making process. In this regard, Saraswati's Anthropology shows us directions and stands as a lighthouse of knowledge.

Note

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