

Book Reviews

KNOWLEDGE, POWER AND IGNORANCE: The Indian Context. Edited by Bidhan Kanti Das, Gorky Chakraborty and Abhijit Guha. pp. xvii+284, figures, tables, index, 2024. Routledge: Oxon. Price: GBP £ 29.59

The present volume on *Knowledge, Power and Ignorance: The Indian Context*, edited by Das, Chakraborty and Guha has been dedicated in the memory of Professor Vinay Kumar Srivastava (1952–2020) who had inspired them to engage in the power play of knowledge and ignorance.

I was delighted when Professor Abhijit Guha requested me to review their book dedicated to Prof. Vinay Kumar Srivastava. This inclination of Prof. Guha dragged me back through a few decades when as a student of B.Sc. (Honours) of Delhi University in 1971, Vinay Kumar Srivastava and his entire classmates of Anthropology Department of Delhi University did their first anthropological fieldwork in December 1971 in Kamre village near Ranchi, when I was a lecturer at Ranchi University in the Department of Anthropology, and just had joined the department a few months back. Professor Srivastava and myself had a close bond as we are from the same university.

Power is invisible. We realize the manifestation of power only when something happens. The happening may be sudden or it may take a prolonged time to express itself. This power play and its manifestation happens in biological as well as on non-biological things of the world. We cannot see electricity and its power; we can realize its power only when we get an electric shock. Or convert that invisible electrical power for mechanical work for human benefits. So power is invisible.

This volume contains thirteen chapters contributed by nineteen scholars representing different universities and institutions of India. This volume has an interesting background. Let me state it first, before coming on to the chapters and the sections partitioned in the volume.

Sometime in the middle of 2019 the three editors

were casually discussing about the book titled *The Anthropology of Ignorance: An Ethnographic Approach* edited by High, Casey, Ann H. Kelly and Jonathan Mair (2012) over cups of tea at the Institute of Development Studies Kolkata (IDSK). And in the end of the discussion, it appeared to them that this otherwise interesting book contains nothing on India on 'Ignorance'. Later they read the book thoroughly again and in subsequent discussions planned to organize a seminar around the theme of ignorance and knowledge in the Indian context. During the planning of the programme for the seminar they found that — “the element of ‘Power’ plays a crucial role in the dyad of ‘Knowledge and Ignorance’. Thus, the title of the seminar turned out to be a triad, “Interaction of Knowledge, Power and Ignorance in the Indian Context.”

Finally, a two-day seminar was held at IDSK during 19-20 December 2019. It was successful, and the organizers were fortunate that it was accomplished before the pandemic. The seminar was organized by the Institute of Development Studies Kolkata (IDSK) in collaboration with the Anthropological Survey of India, Government of India; Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies; and Raja Rammahun Roy Library Foundation Kolkata.

The editors at the end of the Preface write, “.... we decided that it should include the presentation, as chapters, of the speakers as well as non-speakers, who didn't participate in the seminar. and welcome the readers to continue their journey, of sifting through the diverse set of chapters that ultimately shapes the book.”

The chapters in the volume are as follows: Part I Introduction; Part II Epistemological Issues; Part III Understanding Community Perspectives and the State; Part IV Natural Resources, Power and Ignorance; Part V Media and Production of Non-Knowledge; and lastly, Part VI Emerging Areas. The volume contains seven figures and four tables. At the end index presented.

In Part I, under *Introduction* the editors write, "... the broader purpose of this volume is to explore various dimensions of 'known-unknowns'. The basic objective thereby is to throw light on how information is kept out rather than kept in for variety of interests based on different empirically grounded contexts in India today." In the literature survey they observed (*Introduction*, p. 5) that —"Ignorance is strategic when powerful actors make others ignorant by concealing knowledge from them (Proctor and Schiebinger 2008). It may be used as a strategic tool when actors deny liability by pointing their lack of knowledge (McGoey 2007; 2012a).

"Knowledge and the attribution of ignorance are central themes to development, but they remain seriously understudied in the Indian context. The importance of knowledge, and the way it is almost inseparably connected with deliberately projected or consciously practiced 'ignorance' to promote social existence in a specific context, calls for serious attention" (see *Introduction*, p. 6). Knowledge and ignorance are interlinked. Ignorance is a *form of power* complementary to the notion of productive and dispersed 'knowledge/power' which is 'intentional and non-subjective' (*ibid*, p. 7).

The editors emphasize (p. 9), "In practice, ignorance actively participates in the production of knowledge, power and truth. Ignorance therefore may evolve in subtle and systematic ways, for example, data may not be collected or evaluated out of political convenience of preserving the status quo; knowledge may be 'filtered' when scientific evidence travels the politico- administrative ladder. Or, for instance, ignorance and non- knowledge may be embedded in institutional systematic design that is biased in favour of vested interests. Contributors in this volume have attempted to capture knowledge-ignorance interaction from these perspectives with substantiation from India."

Epistemological Issues, Part II, contains two articles. One contributed by Sudeep Basu who discusses on 'Reimagining Ignorance and Forced Migration: Connections and Possibilities', and the other by Nagmani Rao on 'Knowledge, Power and Ignorance: Views from a Gendered Lens'. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that examines the nature, origin, and limits of knowledge.

Epistemological aspects relate to this theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope, and the distinction between justified belief and opinion. And the two authors have done rightly that while discussing their study. Sudeep Basu of Central University of Gujarat has analysed and interpreted his observations based on the issue of forced migration of Tibetan refugees in India. While Nagmani Rao of Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, has viewed from the gendered lens — knowledge, power and ignorance. She concludes, that knowledge production denies women as 'knowers and producers of knowledge, as they are often excluded from such access. Her study has brought to the spotlight (p. 49) that the exclusion of women from knowledge production comes out of the contexts where their voices are deliberately muted, questions they raise are ignored, interrupted or distorted and they are not accepted as having the capability to be experts.

In Part III, *Understanding Community Perspectives and the State*, there are three chapters. The authors of the three chapters have conducted their studies in different geographical localities. Rajat Kanti Das, a former Professor and UGC Emeritus Fellow at the Department of Anthropology, Vidyasagar University, has stated in the opening line of his article (p. 55), 'The Interplay of Knowledge, Power and Ignorance: Looking through the Lens of Community', that "The present exercise is not the outcome of any specific empirically-based research, although there are stray references of some selected empirical studies." The intention of Professor Das is (p. 55): "...to examine the diverse implications of knowledge-ignorance encounters, starting from the level of a community." Prof. Das has observed (p. 55), "At present, at the basic level even in villages the local power landscape cannot be viewed independently of the state and its power to control, which have repercussions on the people – their life ways, resources, traditional structures and attributed meanings. As such, the local political arena now includes reference to culture and customs, to religion, to the network of relations, to economic status and to one's position in society and with regard to attaining political positions." His observations are based on the village communities of West Bengal.

Ratna Dhar of Anthropological Survey of India, discusses about a 'De-notified Community of Central India'. The chapter by Ratna Dhar is based on the study of Banchhada community, which was labelled as a criminal tribe in British India. The author seeks to represent how the state authorities discriminately used power, knowledge and 'strategic ignorance' to demarcate groups of people and communities in order to control and rule them; by building up certain myths and stories and using state machinery and media. Her discussion reveals (p. 87), "that the state machinery and their strategic knowledge can bring forth the images of the communities to the public domain which they use while wielding the power of the state."

Mundayat Sasikumar, Joint Director of Anthropological Survey of India, discusses on 'The Sentinel Islanders and the Myth of Cannibalism: 'Popular Ignorance' as Knowledge'. The Sentinel Islanders of the North Sentinel Island of the Andaman Islands, also known as the Sentinelese, are usually described as the 'most uncontacted', 'most reclusive' people on earth. The author discusses about the photograph presented in *National Geographic* magazine (July 1975) showing of a half-clad Sentinelese drawing his bow against the visiting party of the Indian government. The islanders have endured the awful label for centuries. There is no evidence that the people of Sentinel Island are cannibals. Dr Sasikumar thinks that this fame has also served to protect them from curious foreigners and slave owners for long periods. He suggests at the end (p.105) let this 'popular ignorance' persist for the safety and protection of the Sentinel islanders.

Part IV, deals with *Natural Resources, Power and Ignorance*, containing four chapters, and the seven authors discussed about the power and ignorance in their respective field areas.

Prof. Abhijit Guha, former Professor of Anthropology, Vidyasagar University presents, 'The Story of Land Grab in Medinipur', based on small-

scale, field-based micro-level anthropological perspective. In India anthropologists have conducted intensive studies of the consequences of land acquisition for industries and dams since the early period of independence of the country. At the outset Prof. Guha states (p. 110), "... studying land grab from an ethnographic perspective gave me the opportunity to go through a series of personal encounters which again enabled me to learn beyond what I have experienced at the local level in some villages of the erstwhile Medinipur district in the state of West Bengal in India." Prof. Guha concludes from his study in Medinipur (p. 121), "... fieldwork and ethnography gradually proved to be a source of ignorance since neither I nor the villagers could answer many questions from the level of the villages. So, I moved to the administrative centre from where land grab was being executed. ... I still remained ignorant to a large extent. This ignorance led me to the centre of policy decisions – the West Bengal Assembly and its recorded proceedings. This new archive, hitherto untouched by historians and anthropologists, opened a new window. When I combined the knowledge gained from the three levels of ignorance, it gave me not power but helplessness. This is the story of my journey through ignorance, knowledge and power while studying land grab and displacement in the West Bengal state of India."

Bidhan Kanti Das, Associate Professor of Anthropology at the Institute of Development Studies Kolkata, in the chapter on 'Examining Forest Governance Practices in India', questions about 'Strategic Ignorance for Bureaucratic Control?' To understand the ways of production of knowledge and coproduction of strategic ignorance by the interested state agency during implementation process of FRA at different levels in West Bengal. Professor Bidhan Kanti Das selected two blocks from two districts (Jhargram and Purulia) based on the extent of forest as well as the existence of a higher tribal concentration and higher forest rights claims. Dr Das concluded from his study (p.145), "The state agency, as observed in this case, make constant efforts to disrupt the

statutory institutional structure that delegates power to local communities and intend to control valued resources such as the forest through pre-existing institutional structures.” Forest communities are ignorant of their rights, except as much as the state-level agency intend them to know. The author suggests, “... greater socio-political mobilization is required for empowerment so that they can challenge the powerful forest bureaucracy and reform in forest governance” (p.146).

‘Knowledge and the *Heft* of Ignorance’ have been discussed by Raktim Majumder of the Centre for Financial Accountability, New Delhi, and Gorky Chakraborty of IDSK, focussing their attention on ‘The Government of Conservation Infrastructure in Sundarbans, West Bengal’. Majumder and Chakraborty found that the BLC (Boat Licensing Certificates) emerges as a pivotal instrument in enabling state surveillance and the establishment of the conservation infrastructure in the Sundarbans. The BLC is also relevant for ensuring the stability of the tiger conservation programme. This is because the aquatic population constitutes 25 percent of the tiger food. The reasoning behind the validation of the tiger conservation framework, and its execution through BLCs in Sundarbans, exemplifies a case of institutionalizing a project through a mutual interplay of knowledge and ignorance (p.161). For fishworkers, their lack of understanding regarding the sustainable fish population, crucial for the well-being of tigers, plays a significant role in justifying the existence of BLCs.

The last chapter in Part IV present discussion on ‘Knowledge and Policy/Practice in the Water Sector: Illustrating Contestations and Disconnectedness’, by three authors — K. J. Joy (SOPPECOM, Pune), Bejoy K. Thomas (IISER, Pune) and Jyoti Nair (ATREE, Bengaluru). In the ‘Water Sector’ they found that, “Power, purported or real, play a role in both contestations and disconnectedness, and critical environmental research, including in water management, ...” (p. 167). In this

chapter, the authors use two very different cases from the water sector to show this – one a high-stakes disaster event, viz., the Kerala floods of 2018, and another, a long-term intervention programme, viz., the attempt to promote micro-irrigation, including drip irrigation, among farmers in the context of water scarcity. The cases that they present are illustrative of ways in which the knowledge–policy/practice link can deviate from the idealized model (p. 167). “At a more substantive level, we (*the authors*) show the role that power plays in the engagement between different actors, particularly in the case of the Kerala floods, as the actors concerned have mobilized knowledge to support their positions. In the case of micro-irrigation, we see ignorance combined with power leading to disconnectedness” (p. 167).

Part V and VI, each contains two chapters. In Part V, discussion in chapters revolve around ‘*Media and Production of Non-Knowledge*’, and presents two chapters. One by Somnath (Kolkata) focusses on ‘Aspects of Ignorance in Public Sphere’, and the other the other two scholars, Subrata Mukherjee (IDSK) and Tiasha Dhar (of Zalando) discuss about ‘Knowledge and Ignorance on Health Issues Narrated by Newspapers’. In Part VI, the focus is on ‘Emerging Areas’. Roma Chatterji (formerly of Delhi School of Economics) is currently working on picture storytelling with a special focus on superhero comics in India, presents a chapter on ‘Comics – A Children’s Genre? Censorship, Fantasy and Critique’. The last chapter deals with ‘Ignoring Low-fee Private Schools in India’, authored by Soumyabrato Bagchi, Bhaskar Chakrabarti and Rituparna Das. They have discussed the stories of ‘ignorance’ with the low-fee private schools in India and the related socio-cultural origins. Bagchi, Chakrabarti and Das have observed that people from the bottom of the pyramid are no longer ‘ignorant’ about the inefficiency of the government school, and the importance of English language in job markets. As a result of their awareness, a new business has been developed by entrepreneurs of privately managed low-fee private schools, though a considerable number of such schools are unrecognised in nature and run with a minimum of infrastructure, resources, and unqualified staff. The

parents are often 'ignorant' about these shortcomings (p. 252). The authors have probed how the narratives on 'ignorance', 'known' and 'not known', becomes important in such a context of proliferation of low-fee private schools in India.

This volume explores deeply and extensively the multifarious dimensions of 'knowledge' and 'ignorance' of the general mass in development programmes of the government. The study revolves round what the anthropologists and other social scientists do, or should do, in such situations to make the 'ignorant' known what is 'not known to them'. Anthropologists must come forward through 'media' to expose the design of the administrators and elected representatives, the 'powerful' actors, who make others—the common man, the villagers—ignorant by concealing knowledge from them. A must-read book for anthropologists, sociologists and social workers who are engaged in village development research programmes.

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MEMORIES OF AN INDIAN ANTHROPOLOGIST.
By P. Dash Sharma. pp. xiii+372, figures, 2024.
Serials Publications Pvt. Ltd.: New Delhi. Hardbound.
Price ₹1595/-

This is a thickly written autobiography of an eminent senior Indian anthropologist (b. 1940-). He spent his life teaching and doing research in anthropology, and did important works in the field of development anthropology, though he was trained and researched in physical anthropology under his mentor Prof. Prafullo Chandra Biswas (1903-1984) and Prof. Indera Paul Singh (1928-2016) of Delhi University. He was greatly influenced by the famous pioneering applied anthropologist Professor L. P. Vidyarthi (1931-1985) when he was teaching at Ranchi University. Dr Dash Sharma was trained in Delhi University and his Sanskrit learning gave him a unique Indian character.

The book *Memories of an Indian Anthropologist*, has fourteen densely written chapters packed up with information on various topics with a wonderful preface entitled 'Memories that Linger'. It

was quite interesting to know how Professor Dash Sharma carried his journey in anthropology as well as through a diary of his grandfather which helped him to write his autobiography.

The book combined in a unique way the search for one's own roots with the study of the *adivasi* populations in eastern India. Apart from solid description of anthropological research among the *adivasis* of the Jharkhand region, Dash Sharma was actively involved in rural development projects for the betterment of the living conditions of the underprivileged communities of Jharkhand. He is a true successor of Professor Vidyarthi. Dash Sharma not only taught in Ranchi University but also published numerous research papers in prestigious journals of India and abroad and in many edited books on tribal studies. In 1980 he himself founded *South Asian Anthropologist*, the journal of Sarat Chandra Roy Institute of Anthropological Studies at Ranchi. He also participated actively in the development activities of the tribals run by the NGOs towards the amelioration of the *adivasis*. In chapter nine (*Rural Technology Park*) and chapter ten (*Protective Discrimination and Tribal Development*), the author vividly described this process. Chapters eleven to thirteen (*Science and Spirituality; A Physicist and the Yogi; and Siddhibaba as I Saw Him*) contain the story of the author's encounters with Sree Sree Siddhibaba of Dacca (now Dhaka) who was 'a medical practitioner by profession and a *yogi* by nature and mind' (p. 253). The author's account of the *yogi* was however, based on his 'reflective engagements with the disciples' of Sree Sree Siddhibaba (p. 254).

The book *Memories of an Indian Anthropologist* is probably the first autobiographical account of an Indian anthropologist which needs an empathetic reading. This is a book which showed how an anthropologist could combine various sources of information from his own life and finally write a book for everybody. The book will be useful not only for students, researchers and teachers but also for spiritualists and social workers in India.

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