In 
JAN VAN BREMAN, EYAL BEN-ARI and 
SYED FARID ALATAS (Eds),—
"ASIAN ANTHROPOLOGY", ROUTLEDGE,
LONDON, 2005.
7 ‘Indigenizing’ anthropology in India

Problems of negotiating an identity

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Colonialism, anthropology and the ‘native’

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw increased contact between rapidly expanding ‘West’ and ‘non-Western’ societies, manifested especially in the form of colonial encounters. However, ‘European’ interaction with the ‘Orient’ did not begin with colonialism, with sound evidence of much pre-colonial and non-hegemonic (J. Abu-Lughod 1989) interaction. This chapter explores a facet of this encounter through detailed analysis of a single empirical case. I demonstrate how pre-colonial interaction, colonialism and the discipline of anthropology crystallized both a geographical space (i.e. India as a legitimate culture area) and an intellectual space (‘Indians’ as exotic human others) for subsequent social scientific investigation. This recognition carries important consequences for contemporary efforts to indigenize anthropology in India.

For at least half a century, non-Western scholars have called for the liberation of the social sciences from colonial hegemonic influences. The need to divest both the conceptualization and practice of social science disciplines, of Eurocentric and orientalist biases has been the guiding rationale of this project. One recent variant of such desire is carried in the English word ‘indigenization’, which has over the last few decades found numerous proponents. The aspiration to build autonomous, indigenous social science traditions is not new, having been with us from the 1950s, culminating in efforts to localize, nativize, nationalize and indigenize received social science wisdom. The literature on ‘indigenization’ of the social sciences is complex and multi-dimensional. Without denying important internal differences, it would be fair to say that fundamentally the various voices have challenged the ideological, institutional, theoretical and methodological dominance in social science domains from the core academic and intellectual centres located largely in the West. Despite the prevalence of these ideas, it has been suggested that this challenge has not culminated in a coherent epistemological and theoretical agenda. There is indeed a multiplicity of voices and positions: I interpret this as empowering rather than as a failure as it means that the question of indigenization has not been deemed to have been settled once and for all by my predecessors, making it possible to add yet another voice. This remains a core reason for my continued engagement with issues within this domain.
A further impetus comes from approaching the subject as a ‘liberating discourse’ (S.F. Alatas 1993). Historically, the calls for ‘academic independence’ and overcoming the ‘captive mind’ (S.H. Alatas 1977) closely paralleled the push for political liberation from colonial rule carried in the Third World nationalist movements. The emergent scholarly work served to signal a conceptual, epistemological, methodological and above all a political critique of dominant concepts, categories and dichotomies of investigation used in mainstream social science traditions. The essentialist, homogeneous, reductionist, totalizing and monolithic renderings of the ‘other’ (largely marginal, colonial and subjugated peoples) typically produced in mainstream social science accounts was problematized and calls made to redress these. The beneficiaries of such a critique have been more than those interested in ‘indigenizing’ various social science disciplines. It is clear that the by now common-place critique of essentialist tendencies in ‘European’/‘Western’ orientalist discourses about ‘other’ peoples and places, launched by feminist, post-colonialist, post-orientalist and deconstructionist theorists, was in a very serious way already anticipated and embedded in the discourse about ‘decolonizing’ the social sciences. Presumably, the various proponents of indigenization intended to generate a social science that avoids the essentialism, problematic reification and stereotypical tendencies inherent in ‘mainstream’ social science. I have chosen to explore these issues using the case of anthropology in India as it is not particularly problem-ridden or unique in its experience of attempting to ‘indigenize’ anthropology. Rather, I use the Indian material to accomplish these aims:

- To abstract and identify elements that typify indigenization efforts in Indian anthropology.
- To underscore the problematics inherent in indigenization agendas that are rooted in weak conceptual frameworks.

My argument about India and Indian anthropology is explicated in two steps. First, I demonstrate that the constitution of India’s ‘otherness’ predates anthropological attempts to categorize India and Indians as relevant objects of anthropological inquiry. Ideas about India were in currency before both the colonial and the anthropological encounters between Europe and the subcontinent. Second, I draw connections between these pre-existing images and the development of anthropological studies in India, outlining the discourse surrounding efforts to create a specifically ‘Indian’ anthropology. These discussions reveal the complex and problematic ways in which ‘native anthropologists’ (Kuwayama 2003, 2004) have tried and continue to claim a separate agenda for Indian anthropology, premised upon a different, non-Western image of India. While the image of India as an exotic ‘other’ holds for Western constructions of anthropology, the dialectics of constituting India both as ‘self’ and ‘other’ characterize an attempt to craft an indigenous anthropology in India today.

**Constitution of India’s otherness**

The terms ‘India’, ‘Africa’ and ‘America’ and the images they conjured in the minds of Christian Europeans were as much constructions as was ‘Europe’
itself, arises out of lengthy colonial interactions between the representations of European imperial and local wielders of power in pluralistic, plurinational regions. Just as the meanings attached to the label ‘Negro’ changed dramatically after Atlantic slavery, and there were no ‘Indians’ in the Americas before Hispanic conquest, so also the ‘Hindoostan’ and ‘Hindoos’ that emerged after the British encounter were unlike the imaginations of other Europeans prior to this episode.

An analysis of the intellectual heritage of anthropology must be grounded in pre-existing European knowledge and debates about the Orient. Anthropology did not invent but has inherited the ‘savage slot’ with its various ‘others’ including natives and primitives (Trouillot 1991). In appropriating this slot as the epistemological and methodological foundation of their discipline, anthropologists have reconstituted and transformed it in critical ways. It was never a monolith in the first place. Over time anthropology has added new variants to this category.

The constitution of India’s otherness was a complex historical process to which my brief treatment cannot do full justice. Clearly, images and evaluations of India, the land, its peoples and customs, changed greatly between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. Neither is the process purely a concern with the past. The discovering and labelling of the other still goes on. My intentions are to demonstrate that (a) European discussions of India have focused on its religion, language, law, state, political economy and social structure (Inden 1990); (b) such foci have led to the selection of specific traits that were, and continue to be, perceived as ‘Indian’ – Sanskrit, caste, Hinduism, rural and socially rigid; and (c) the association of these traits with India are perpetuated in scholarly accounts of India, including anthropological narratives.

The lead taken by Greek geographers, historians and philosophers is evident in the early contact between India and Greece. These contacts may have been facilitated by the development of land routes along India’s north-eastern and, particularly, north-western borders (Kaul 1979). The Portuguese ‘discovery’ of the route around the Cape of Good Hope into the Indian Ocean (the Greeks’ Erythraean Sea) and to India heralded a new phase in sea travel, maritime trade and sustained interaction between Europeans and Indians. Knowledge about Indian religions, languages (particularly Sanskrit), customs such as sati, caste, garb, eating habits (Thapar 1979: 19) and royal courts revealed India as a land of the fantastic and the fabulous. Ptolemy’s geography and the Periphus of the Erythrean Sea provided significant geographical data on ‘India’ to primarily Christian audiences up to the 1500s (ibid.: 6). During the sixteenth century, increased Portuguese, Dutch, Italian and English presence redefined existing European images of India’s territorial boundaries (Lach 1968: 340–1).

Clearly, the places described in these varied accounts as ‘India’ are not the same as the geographical and socio-political entity known as India today. There does not seem to be a single territorial ‘indigenous’ label used to designate what is today called ‘India’. Denotations such as Aryavarta (the country of the Aryans) and Bharat, the name of a mythic ancient King, have sometimes been applied by the inhabitants of India to this geographical entity. In medieval, renaissance and
colonial accounts the words ‘Hindoostan’ and ‘Indostan’ are frequently used interchangeably with India. Thus, the very boundaries of territories within India today (not to mention the labelling of these as territories as India) were as much a construction by outsiders as the social, cultural, religious and political descriptions of this land and its peoples.

Significantly, a Europe that imagined India was not itself a pre-existing entity. It was constructed simultaneously while ‘inventing’ India and other such groupings as an ‘other’. Inden makes this point elegantly:

I will argue that Euro-American Selves and Indian Others have not simply interacted as entities that remain fundamentally the same. They have dialectically constituted one another.

(1990: 3)

The mould in which India was cast reflected European preoccupations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries more than it reflected an empirical reality. Europe’s concern with emerging industrial capitalism and the growth of cities, the rise of bureaucracies, debates on reason and rationality, the romantic imagination, Christianity and religion, individualism, politics and statehood and equality profoundly influenced their debates about Asia and the East.

Notwithstanding the existence of published material on India in Europe through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Marshall (1970: 2–3) argues that ‘widespread European discussion of India took place mostly in the second half of the 18th century’, primarily from British perspectives. Much of this discussion centred on Indian religion and specifically on Hinduism and its relationship to caste and the Sanskrit language.

The Indian debate in British circles engaged missionaries, travellers, traders and intellectual elites starting from about the eighteenth century. The administration of India as a Crown colony in 1858 created a need to make sense of India’s location within the British Empire. Romantic renderings of India are captured in the imagination of a group of English civil servants who arrived around 1780, under the governorship of Warren Hastings. The most notable being Sir William Jones, whose interests in India included law, religion, language and literature amongst others. He served as a Supreme Court judge in 1783, learned Sanskrit and asserted that Greek, Latin and Sanskrit had common origins. On Hinduism, he noted that ‘the omnipresence, wisdom and goodness of God’ was ‘the basis of Indian philosophy’ (Marshall 1970: 40). For him, the apparent eroticism of the Bhagvat Purana and Gita Govinda was ‘no proof of depravity in their morals’ (ibid.: 41). Other English writers in the second half of the eighteenth century who portrayed Hinduism in a positive and favourable light include John Zephaniah Holwell, a surgeon who served in the East India Company in Bengal. He described Hinduism as belief in ‘one God, eternal, omnisc, omnipotent and omniscient’; the apparent polytheism was ‘to be taken only in a figurative sense’ (ibid.: 27). Charles Wilkins, who translated the Bhagavat Gita, described Hindu commentators very positively. The later work of German Indologist Friedrich
Schlegel further exemplifies such romantic interpretations of India. According to Schlegel:

this philosophy contains a multitude of the sublimest reflections on the separation from all earthly things, and on the union with the God-head; and there is no high conception in this department of metaphysics, unknown to the Hindoos.

(1890: 160)

Mysticism and other-worldly concerns pervade descriptions of Indian philosophy, mentality and religion in these accounts. The work of missionaries and romantic Indologists led to the definition of India as a society marked by extreme religiosity, structured hierarchically by caste and as a land of imagination. Other features attributed to India were its ‘otherworldly’ and non-rational orientation, an idea systematically emphasized by Max Muller, who published his *The Sacred Books of the East* (1879) and *India: What it can Teach Us?* (1883). These endeavours to understand India reflect a process whereby the self also encounters and constructs itself through a discovery of an other. Interestingly, William Jones had planned to undertake the writing of *Britain Discovered*, a project that would underscore the point that the discovery of India involved an effort ‘...to define both an Indian-and a British identity’ (Majeed 1990: 219). It however did not materialize.

Despite these positive evaluations, ‘...(British) opinion was beginning to harden against Hinduism’ (Marshall 1970: 41) at the end of the eighteenth century. This attack against Hinduism was led in England by Evangelical Christians and social reformers. Charles Grant, writing from India about Hindus in 1785, says ‘It is hardly possible to conceive any people more completely enchained than they are by their superstition.’ William Wilberforce, the abolitionist hero, ‘...inferred that the natives of India, and more particularly the Brahmans, were sunk into the most abject ignorance and vice’ (Marshall 1970: 42). By the early years of the nineteenth century, Hindus (and Indians) were presented as superstitious, primitive and idol-worshippers, and the British presence rationalized as one of civilizing the natives.

James Mill, a British philosopher and historian, in his *The History of British India* in 1858, analyses Indian society, about which William Thomas (in the Introduction to the 1975 edition) states:

India became a field in which the philosopher’s ethical theories and legal schemes could be put to the test.

Mill's concern in the *History* was less with constructing an image of India as such, and more with demonstrating what he considered to be universal philosophical truths. He criticized Jones’s romanticization of India and his celebration
of the 'Indian imagination'. Mill associated the 'imagination' with conservatism and argued instead in favour of instrumental rationality as a rhetoric of reform in India (Majeeed 1990).

From James Mill to Hegel, accounts of caste,\textsuperscript{15} based on travellers' tales and missionaries' and administrators' reports, have made caste into the central pillar of their constructs' (Inden 1990: 82-4). In these treatises, all aspects of Indian social life were linked to castes. Caste was seen as an essential marker of social, religious, cultural, economic and racial aspects of Indian identity. It was further invoked by British and German scholars to explain India's intellectual degradation, vulnerability to conquest, the presence of a rigid social order, absence of individualism and her static, unchanging nature.

The social institution of caste was defined as peculiarly Indian, and tied inextricably to Hinduism,\textsuperscript{16} such that attention to these two (defined negatively) was seen to be integral to understanding Indian civilization. The earlier reverential stance towards Indian customs, articulated by Warren Hastings in 1773, had undergone dramatic change by the middle of the nineteenth century, particularly after the Indian Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. By the turn of the twentieth century, India was perceived as predominantly Hindu—a distinct, backward, primitive cultural region, as opposed to the European civilization. The discourse on caste was further elaborated through German and British debates on the political economy of Europe and Asia. Scholars like Sir Henry Maine and Montier-Williams characterized India as a land of villages. Marx and Engels in their discussions of the Asiatic mode of production contributed indirectly to the discourse about Indian villages.

Marx depicted Indian villages as self-sufficient, static communities, lacking a free market, a state, private property and a competitive spirit (Ghosh 1984). The Indian village was declared to be a fundamental unit of analysis for India.

Collectively the indological, orientalist and colonial discourses have led to a particular essentialist construction of India, whose otherness was achieved through an equally essentialist definition of Europe or the West as the 'self'. A complex of uniquely defining features culminated into an exclusive definition: the existence of castes, varieties of Hinduism, an agrarian and primitive economy, patterns of kinship and social organization and the absence of distinctive national unity. India was what the West was not: rural, mystical and irrational, intensely religious, inegalitarian, oriented towards the collective rather than the individual, traditional, technologically backward and stateless.

Anthropology in India did not emerge in an intellectual vacuum. The boundaries of British discourse preceding institutionalization of the discipline in India have shaped anthropological studies about India in definite ways. Why, for instance, does talk about India even today inevitably bring to mind labels like 'Hindu', 'caste', 'villages'—which have assumed the status of 'foundational categories' (Mathur 2000) to mention just a few? Part of the answer lies in a specific construction of India up to the late nineteenth century and its accompanying discourse which forms the background against which non-Indian scholars initiated anthropology in India. Indian anthropologists are aware of this intellectual history
in attempts to produce an Indian variant of this discipline. But this enterprise itself is fundamentally linked to the history of anthropology in India, to which we now turn.

Anthropology in India

Anthropological research in India, in the late nineteenth century, came on the heels of the imaginings and discourses just detailed. Studies of caste and social stratification, kinship, family and social organization, religious rituals, beliefs and institutions, customs and folklore, Indian music, dance and painting, village communities and tribes have preoccupied both non-Indian and Indian scholars well into the twentieth century.

A review of the Indian anthropological literature reveals a relatively ‘straight-forward’ and unproblematic account of the importation of the discipline to India and its subsequent development therein (Dube 1973; Mahapatra 1997). However, this history also recognizes and articulates colonial and imperialist links with anthropology, particularly in works produced over the last two decades (Prakash 1990; Mathur 2000). Surajit Sinha’s (1971)17 historical sketch of anthropology in India leads to a three-part periodization: the British colonial period (1774–1919), the pre-independence period (1920–49) and the post-independence era (1950–to date).

During the first phase, the colonial roots of Indian anthropology are evident in studies initiated by the British colonial administrators and missionaries. These documentaries of the native social and cultural life were undertaken to facilitate effective colonial administration. The exercise also generated detailed ethnographic monographs about aspects of caste, village life and religiosity. Indian social scientists are well aware that ‘Anthropology ... was entangled in an orientalist project’ (Patel 2002: 272). The foundations of Indian anthropology were laid between 1891 and 1931, when with the launching of the Census of India, the empirical study of caste and tribes came into existence. At the same time, Indian scholars18 conducted research on Indian tribes producing ethnographic monographs in the tradition of British social anthropology.

In the pre-independence period, the formalization of the discipline in India was secured with the establishment of the first Indian Department of Anthropology at the University of Calcutta in 1920 (Patel 2002). The following year saw the publication of ‘the first full-fledged Indian Journal of Anthropology, Man in India’ (S. Sinha 1971).19 In this crucial period, Indian anthropologists were still trained in Britain, the United States and Germany, but the dominant influence of the British anthropological traditions is apparent in the works produced.

In the final phase, nationalistic (‘Swarajist’) and independence movements injected a political dimension to intellectual debates in Indian anthropology. There was an increasing patronage from the Indian government to teaching and research in anthropology (ibid.: 3). Although the model of British anthropology prevailed, the input of American scholars in Indian studies increased at this time.20 This last influence further shifted the anthropological focus from ‘tribe’ to ‘caste’ and ‘village’, from ‘tribals’ to ‘peasants’, and spurred an interest in culture
and personality studies and in the interactions of ‘little communities’ with ‘great traditions’ (Singer 1972). Most significantly, following the nationalist call for political independence, Indian anthropologists made a strong case for ‘indigenizing’ the social sciences in India (Dube 1973; Fahim 1982; Pathy 1988b).

A case for an ‘Indian’ anthropology

Anthropological research in India over the last five decades has undoubtedly been redefined in dramatic ways. Mathur (2000) itemizes these shifts eloquently and names five important developments. I discuss only one – the concern with producing indigenous forms of knowledge. Notwithstanding this rethinking, studies of India today by Indian and non-Indian scholars still reproduce the image of India as an exotic ‘other’, and through the particular project of indigenizing anthropology, the image of India as an exotic self. This orientalist and indological image of India has, however, been contested vigorously in recent years, particularly, by Indian scholars (Ahmad 1972; Thapan 1988; Bhattacharyya 2004). They also point to the blatant neglect of non-Hindu, non-tribal, non-caste dimensions of Indian life, and to the dearth of urban and political studies in the anthropological literature, emphasizing India’s cultural, socio-economic, religious and political heterogeneity, thus questioning the British presentation of India as a monolith. However, it would be erroneous to suggest that there is anything resembling a unified homogeneous voice in Indian anthropological discourse. The contestations and controversies are many and the following pages show where these are located and how they are articulated.

Contemporary situation in Indian anthropology

Evaluations of social sciences disciplines in India (including anthropology) point to an ‘intellectual crisis’, which Indian anthropologists express in various terms (Danda 1981; Pathy 1988a). These include a perceived ‘lack of enthusiasm and creativity’ (Misra 1972), the inability to generate new theories and methods, a stifled growth of the discipline because of limited resources, a lack of coherence and proper direction, irrelevance of anthropological researches to India, the mindless imitation of the Western anthropological models (Sharma 1990) and, contradictorily, the fact that Indian anthropology is ‘lagging’ in comparison to Western research. This self-reflexivity leads to such questions as ‘Is Indian anthropology dead/dying?’ (Basu and Biswas 1980) and ‘And why an Indian sociology?’ (Ray 1989). There are, however, voices that claim greater achievements for Indian anthropology and argue that the discipline has ‘come of age’ (Atal 1976; Hasnain 1988). However, the predominant view since the late 1960s supports the urgency of re-evaluating and redefining the content and priorities of Indian anthropology. But recent readings of the field have called for a more nuanced evaluation of crisis with more precision (Chatterjee 2002).

Local anthropologists consistently emphasize the need to carve out a suitable niche for the discipline both in an Indian and a global context. This new image for Indian anthropology is articulated largely as a call for a unique and distinct
anthropology relevant to the particularities of India. However, the designing of an Indian anthropology has turned out to be more problematic than envisaged. ‘Indian-ness’ is not a pre-existing agreed upon entity, but instead has to be constructed. In wanting to present their profession as particularly ‘Indian’, Indian anthropologists struggle to chart a unique course for their discipline. Yet, the fact that they must craft their profession against the backdrop of epistemological, methodological and historical commonality with Euro-American anthropology exacerbates their problems. In a sense, Indian anthropologists are trapped within their own history as anthropologists. How do Indian anthropologists claim ‘uniqueness’ while acknowledging a common history with Western anthropology?

One way out of this predicament, alluded to by some Indian anthropologists (Roy 1986; Khare 1990) is to invoke a new and different beginning for Indian anthropology which temporally precedes colonialism and the birth of anthropology in the West. This invention of indigenous roots attributes anthropological insight to ancient Indian texts such as the Laws of Manu as well as to teachings of Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and other Indian humanists. Inherent in these sojourns into an Indian past is an attempt to redefine not just the history of Indian anthropology but its very epistemology and methodology. For example, Vidyarthi has this to say about the ‘Indian-ness’ of anthropology:

> But it does not mean that social anthropology in India should overlook what may be termed ‘Indianness’ of its science. Perhaps to some extent it has not done so, as it has not progressed under the spell of unthinking imitation…

> Then, we have had our own sets of social thinkers who have given thought to the social problems from time to time and who have also given direction to them…. Also, with the series of thinkers, ancient scriptures like the Vedas, Upanishads, Smritis, Purarnas and epics etc. are full of social facts and they need to be studied carefully to develop ‘Indianness’ in the social anthropology of India, which should be specially used in the study of cultural process and civilizational history of India.

(1980: 20)

This search for ‘Indian-ness’ has led to a range of difficulties in practice. It is not a pre-existing agreed upon entity, but instead has to be constructed and negotiated through a maze of diverging perspectives.

‘Indian-ness’ of anthropology in India

The category ‘Indian anthropology’ is widely used by Indian anthropologists, and some invoke the label ‘native anthropologist’ to denote their identity. However there is no consensus on the content of either category, both of which are contested. The project of nativizing anthropology combines the following elements: study of India and privileging relevance of anthropological research to Indian problems, which is to be undertaken in a different way by Indians, but not
closed to non-Indian scholars; and using as a rationale, thus producing Indian theories.

This self-conscious call for a ‘national’ anthropology does not mean a total rejection of Western anthropological models. In their constructions of anthropology, Indian anthropologists retain selected elements from the anthropology of the West, such as the definition of anthropology as a scientific discipline, the methodology of fieldwork and participant observation, the distinction between pure and applied research, and the definition of India as the subject of anthropological discourse. The specific orientalist presentation of India and the perceived dominance of Western ideas in Indian social scientific research are rejected. The rejection of such ‘academic colonialism’ is expressed in the need for the relevance of anthropological research to the Indian context. Misra expresses a view that is shared by a majority of contemporary Indian scholars:

that Indian social scientists have not been able to establish their own traditions but instead play a role which is subservient to the foreign ‘masters’.

(1972: 92)

Attention is drawn to ‘academic colonialism’ (K.S. Singh 1984) and the ‘servitude of the mind of Indian academics’ (Misra 1972; Saberwal 1983). The explicit invocation of the term ‘swaraj’ (from Hindi, literally ‘self-rule’), in a discussion of Indian social sciences (Uberoï 1968) conflates the desire for self-rule and political liberation with the need for ‘decolonizing’ anthropology in India (S. Sinha 1971: 1). Given the common historical, epistemological and methodological commonalities between anthropology in India and its Western counterparts, how ‘native/indigenous’ can ‘Indian’ anthropology be? Can one attempt to craft an anthropology peculiar to an ‘indigenous’ Indian context? The rhetoric of indigenization has effectively opened a Pandora’s box. The attempts to nativize anthropology lead to the contestation of such categories as ‘India’, ‘Hindu’, ‘Indian-ness’, ‘indigenous’, and ‘Indian anthropology’.

Consensus on the content of these categories and the nature of Indian ‘roots’ (Jairath 1984) has turned out to be impossible. A number of inherent difficulties impede indigenization of Indian anthropology. How is the notion of ‘Indian-ness’ to be translated? What constitutes ‘Indian-ness’? Who defines it? Given the tremendous ethnic, religious, political, ideological and socio-economic diversity that characterizes Indian society, how is the proposed ‘indigenization of anthropology’ from an ‘Indian’ perspective to be accomplished? (Bailey 1959; Ahmad 1972; Thapan 1988). Indian anthropologists are conscious of these problems, as Pathy exemplifies:

But it must be acknowledged that there are multiple versions of indigenization, including those popularized by the multinational foundations as well as ruling classes. The tragedy of indigenization is its failure to take account of the country’s socio-cultural diversity and multiple centres of culture and history.

(1988a: 18, italics added)
Ironically, the debates reveal that the very heterogeneity of Indian social life that is used to contest and ‘correct’ orientalist renditions of India, now itself becomes an obstacle. This problem has to be overcome in order to even contemplate a consensus about conceptualizing the categories ‘Indian’ and ‘indigenous’.

The indigenization of anthropology is further expressed as: the need to conduct research that is ‘substantively Indian’ and to generate methods and theory that are specifically ‘Indian’ (Thapan 1988). The need for an Indian viewpoint has been reiterated by many scholars (Roy 1986; Madan 1991; Uberoi 1968. 1974; Y. Singh 1970; S. Sinha 1971; Sahay 1976; Vidyarthi 1980). Attempts made by Indian anthropologists to articulate an Indian viewpoint culminate in such rhetorical questions as ‘Is there an Indian way of thinking?’ (Ramanujan 1989) and ‘Is there an Indian tradition in social/cultural anthropology?’ (S. Sinha 1971) which have no quick or easy answers.

Applied anthropology and development

One more manoeuvre with which Indian anthropology attempts to create its own space is the emphasis on India constructed in opposition to ‘Western’ nations. India is what the West is not to Indian anthropologists: Third World, non-Western, under-developed, with specificities such as extreme poverty, problems of nation-building and rural development, social and economic inequality, tribal groups unevenly integrated and overpopulated. In so defining their object of study, Indian anthropologists claim a fundamentally different agenda for their anthropology. They attest that from the earliest days of Indian independence, Indian anthropology was set up in direct opposition to Western anthropology, itself crystallized as a monolith. Binary oppositions such as ‘applied’ versus ‘pure’ research, ‘practice’ versus ‘theory’ and ‘abstract theorizing’ versus ‘application of knowledge’ have been, and continue to be, invoked to sustain the claimed incompatibilities (Mahapatra 1997; Mathur 2000; Patel 2002).

The emphasis in Indian anthropology since the independence of India has indeed been on development (Mahapatra 1997; Patel 2002) and planned social change. This reflects the context of a newly independent Third World country where economic development and the restructuring of societal domains become urgent priorities. The explicit engagement of anthropologists in India with the British colonial government, particularly, in relation to the welfare of tribes, meant that anthropologists continued to perceive themselves as affiliated with administrators and policymakers in independent India. In the 1950s and 1960s, there was a great deal of enthusiasm and hope for the contributions that anthropological knowledge could make towards a ‘better India’. Anthropology then presented itself not only as able to diagnose social problems but also as qualified to provide solutions (Sachidananda 1980: 16; Roy Burman 1982; Mathur 1987; Halbar 1991). This enthusiasm has waned somewhat since the 1970s. The reality of the tensions between administrators and anthropologists has come forcefully to the fore (Mathur 1980; Dang 1982).

This desire to be seen as an ‘applied science’ strongly marks Indian anthropology today. This is not to suggest that Indian anthropologists see themselves as
engaging exclusively with the applied components of their discipline. Many insist on a need to engage in anthropological research with the aim of consolidating the theoretical framework of the discipline (Y. Singh 1970; Saberwal 1983), renewing a call for theorizing that cuts through all periods of Indian anthropology. The crucial difference today is that the future of Indian anthropology is perceived by its practitioners to lie in its ability to demonstrate its social relevance to problems within the Indian context (Pathy 1987; Hasnain 1988; Guha 1989; K.S. Singh 1991; Srivastava 1991). 27

Despite the noted crises in Indian anthropology, its practitioners do hold a vision of the future for their discipline. Sarana and D. Sinha (1976: 216) invoke the phrase ‘anthropological self-study’ to describe Indian anthropology in India. The juxtaposition of anthropology with analysis of the self might seem to be a contradiction in terms. But, these two anthropologists theorize self-study by Indians as follows:

One of our greatest drawbacks is the lack of other-culture studies by Indian anthropologists. It is high time that we did develop expertise in this field because research among other cultures has been the forte of anthropology…. However, what has until now been our weakness will prove to be a source of strength in the very near future. We do not think there is any other country in the world where anthropological self-study has been conducted by native-born anthropologists for almost seven decades. Before long, anthropologists of all countries, particularly the developing countries, will have to start studying their own culture. We cannot anticipate the kinds of problems these native anthropologists will face. This new aspect of anthropology in almost every country will encounter growing pains. The only exception will be India, which has long passed that stage.

(Ibid.: 217)

A significant number of anthropologists in India, in recent years, have stated their research agenda as one where the production of knowledge is aimed directly at the solution of social problems (Patel 2002; Chatterjee 2002). However, there are real differences in stating what anthropologists should do, what they can do, what they actually do and what is done with the knowledge produced. The inclination of Indian anthropologists to advocate applied aspects of the discipline have much to do with the structural frameworks within which anthropology has operated in the past, and continues to do so.

The patronage accorded to anthropological organizations in India by governments (as early as 1880s), have created a dependence upon the state. The bulk of anthropological research is funded by the Central for various State governments (Chatterjee 2002). Funding from private organizations or philanthropists is practically non-existent. Resources are scarce. What little is available provokes intense competition from other social sciences. In such a context, it makes sense that Indian anthropologists feel the need to demonstrate the relevance of their research to administrators and policy-makers. In order to legitimize their cause,
Indian anthropologists have to present themselves as committed to planning, development and nation-building (Hebbar 2003). They must demonstrate the usefulness of their craft in the real world to be seen as relevant and legitimate.

The one domain of Indian society where Indian anthropologists have always exercised their leadership role is in the administration of tribal affairs. Although Indian anthropologists have, in recent years, tried to expand their repertoire by carrying their research to other areas such as education, housing, population studies, rural planning, structures in the workplace and urban contexts, tribal welfare and the concern with scheduled castes and tribes have remained their expertise. In a sense the administrator-anthropologist's preoccupation with 'primitives' and 'tribes' and the early engagement of Indian scholars with the same issues continue to haunt Indian anthropologists today. The perceived existence of the 'tribes' in India and efforts to properly locate them in Indian society then ironically continues to legitimate Indian anthropologists.

Apart from influencing policy decisions vis-à-vis scheduled tribes and castes, and some presence in 'government-sponsored statutory institutions and corporations' (Mahapatra 1997), it would be fair to say that their accomplishments in nation-building tasks have been minuscule. Yet, it is curious that the rhetoric of 'relevance of anthropology' to address urgent practical, social problems has been in currency amongst practitioners for about four decades. Another way of getting at the same point is to pose other questions: What are the structural constraints under which Indian anthropologists function? What can they do? What options do they have in terms of real bread and butter issues such as getting jobs? What avenues are open to them apart from research and teaching in academia? Tribal research institutes in various parts of India, the Anthropological Survey of India and the Indian Council of Social Science Research, in addition to the universities, absorb the bulk of graduating anthropologists. A large number of anthropologists have to look elsewhere. The various government departments can and do potentially utilize such individuals (Chatterjee 2002) and it would thus seem that Indian anthropologists can find avenues for making themselves heard and potentially apply their knowledge to solve practical problems. However, by the admission of Indian anthropologists themselves, a great deal of distrust, mistrust, scepticism and suspicion characterizes their relationship with 'the government' (Sachidananda 1980: 17–18). Many anthropologists argue that the tensions between themselves and 'the government' make it difficult to use anthropological knowledge for solving real problems.

Clearly, these directions in contemporary Indian anthropology cannot be explained by structural factors in isolation from others. However, the material and economic considerations, compounded by political factors, profoundly influence how the discipline in India is conceptualized and presented by its practitioners. This is not to argue that this situation is either unique or specific to the Indian scene, but to underscore that the reality of limited institutional resources greatly affects the very survival of the profession. The last observation may provide a partial explanation for at least the explicitly stated anthropological agenda of Indian anthropologists couched in terms of applied research and not only abstract theorizing.
Problematic of negotiating an identi
can re-thinking ‘indigenization’

The English word ‘indigenization’ came into popular currency in social science discourses in the late 1970s and 1980s, adding to earlier vocabulary of decolonizing, disengaging and delinking from centres of social science power. Today, however the term has fallen into some disrepute and has been rejected even by earlier adherents, although sufficient numbers remain committed to the underlying political and intellectual project. This rejection is rooted at least in the awareness that to begin with the term and the agenda have been inadequately conceptualized. Proposals have been made to continue the project using instead a different language of generating ‘counter-Eurocentric’ and ‘alternative’ discourses. In these altered modes, the indigenization project continues to engage a number of different parties: laypersons, development planners, politicians, government authorities, funding agencies and academics, alerting us to varied and contested interpretations of the label, some of which border on nativism and chauvinism in the outright rejection of all ‘Western’ forms of social science knowledge. Through these usages, the term is loosely invoked and assigned a taken-for-granted set of meanings. This popular but unproblematized invocation has rendered the project of rethinking and remaking social science disciplines ambiguous and obscure, and the agenda poorly formulated.

As I have argued previously (V. Sinha 1997), despite strong criticism of the term and the agenda it carries, a discourse on ‘indigenization’ in the social sciences does exist. But this is marginal to mainstream social science as practised both in the core and in the periphery. Even if the terms ‘indigenous’, ‘native’ and ‘indigenization’ are admittedly problematic, it is clear that the inherent agenda of rethinking social science foundations and their relevance in specific socio-cultural contexts cannot be as easily dismissed. Whereas at the level of practice, participants in the field show tremendous energy and industry, the conceptual components receive far less attention. This has meant that the categories in use in this field remain inadequately conceptualized. The empirical translation of an indigenization agenda that is rooted in weak conceptual foundations is thwarted both by theoretical and political difficulties. Such a programme is open to charges of parochialism and chauvinism, and critiqued on these grounds even by proponents of indigenization. Most proponents of indigenization either spend little energy conceptualizing ‘indigenization’, or bypass the conceptual dimension altogether in favour of the mechanics of ‘how to indigenize’ a particular discipline. I have argued elsewhere (V. Sinha 1997, 2002) for the need to reconceptualize the notion of indigenization, and proposed for consideration a set of seven issues, attention to which might facilitate a more workable indigenization project in practice. But applying some of these to the Indian case reveals yet again how tricky and awkward the translation exercise really is.

One element in the indigenization of anthropology of India is an effort to identify the ‘Indian-ness’ of the discipline. I suggest that this equation of indigenization with ‘Indianization’ with a search for the essence of what it means to be ‘Indian’
is both conceptually and politically problematic, and runs the risk of being labelled parochial, chauvinistic and exclusionary. A meaningful conceptualization necessitates problematizing the epistemological and political status of the categories ‘indigenous’ and ‘native’ in anthropology as well as the relations between colonialism and anthropological knowledge production, something only more recent anthropological works in India attend to, and which is largely missing in the earlier long-standing indigenization discourse. Third World anthropologists have attempted to claim the category ‘native’ to mark refashioned identities and a discipline, without the marginalizing and subjugating tone it has carried. Although many groups defined as ‘native/other/indigenous’ have embraced the label and attempt to redefine it, it is equally crucial to ask what are the consequences of being labelled ‘indigenous’ and/or ‘native’. The example of Indian anthropologists is a case in point (Karlsson 2003).

A version of indigenization that does not adequately theorize a shared common history (through colonial and imperial encounters), with Western social science is also wanting. In claiming a distinct historical, epistemological, methodological and political space for their discipline, Indian anthropologists cannot start as if from a clean slate. The eighteenth and nineteenth-century images of the ‘Indian Subcontinent’ that informed early anthropological researches in India constitute their intellectual inheritance. In this sense the latter’s claims for ‘nativity’ does not and cannot justify a complete break with the Western anthropological traditions. The challenge is to find meaningful ways of theorizing this link. Also, a sound conceptualization of indigenization is neither a categorical rejection of all Western input, nor does it seek to replace Eurocentrism with nativism or any other dogmatic position. Over the last decade, anthropological works in India do not reveal simplistic statements about the possibility of Indianizing anthropology, particularly as completely de-linked from its counterparts in the North. Through the combined influence of ‘Subaltern Studies Collective in India’ (Mathur 2000: 93) and feminist scholarship, Indian anthropologists have revisited in a critical mode the ‘entanglement’ of anthropology with both the colonial and nationalist projects. A more sophisticated attempt to make sense of links with Western academia avoid literal reading of ‘indigenization’, preventing a search for ‘indigenous’ roots and the ‘essence’ of Indian-ness, Chinese-ness or African-ness etc., as defining features of an indigenized discipline.

Although the ‘core–periphery’ dichotomy in the world of social science needs to be problematized, realistically speaking a divide does exist and, more importantly, structures unequal relations within the global academic and intellectual arenas. Associated with this partition is a specialization or division of labour vis-à-vis social scientific research (Pletsch 1981). It has been pointed out that while scholars from the West are generators of concepts and theory (of universal and comparative value), their non-Western counterparts are viewed largely as providers of empirical material and local knowledge (S.F. Alatas 2000). In a radical rethinking exercise, this traditional global division of labour, the intellectual specialization and academic dependency (S.F. Alatas 2003) would be questioned, challenged and transformed. In a larger context, the issue is an important one of
what is to be the nature of relationship between the kind of social science research that is done by ‘Western’ scholars and their ‘non-Western’ counterparts.

Scholars who define indigenization through attention to an applied dimension are caught in something of a double bind, as is seen in the Indian case through the opposition between applied and pure research. Given the structural constraints under which many Third World social scientists operate, there are tensions between the demands of a ‘pragmatic’ nature (satisfying regional/localized interest) and the exigencies of engagement with a wider global community of scholars and intellectuals. How does one remain relevant to local/regional particularities and yet engage with larger theoretical issues of a universal and comparative nature?

Unfortunately, by defining their agenda as ‘applied’, Indian anthropologists are further marginalized from the concerns of Western anthropology. Furthermore, the explicit particularizing of Indian anthropology leads to a disengagement (perhaps unintentional) of Indian scholars from current issues deemed relevant in Euro-American anthropology. But such distancing is mutual. The lack of attention to native scholarly discourses in anthropology in the West is evident. At the same time, the need to pay attention to and conceptualize indigenous discourses and accord voices to native informants is fashionably reiterated in current anthropological writings. Are the agendas set by Indian and Western anthropologists so mutually incongruent to warrant this double silence? I submit that in these times of acknowledged crises in anthropology, it is crucial to theorize the silence of anthropologists both in the core and in the periphery.

Notes

1 This chapter is grounded in the awareness that none of these words – Western, European, non-Western can be used without the necessary problematization.
2 The choice of ‘India’, ‘Africa’ and ‘America’ is not arbitrary. Granting heterogeneity in colonial experiences some commonality can nonetheless be abstracted. Any discussion of India without reference to Africa, and vice-versa, is necessarily incomplete.
3 In using the term ‘European’ I am aware that Europe was itself not a pre-existing entity before the sixteenth century. I focus primarily on British and to some extent German contributions which culminated in constructions of India in highly specific terms.
4 Interestingly, the designation of the lands beyond the Indus river as ‘India’ is attributed to Alexander, whose contacts were confined to areas in the north-west of the subcontinent. The totality of India, stretching from northern Kashmir to southern Kanyakumari was not implied in European accounts of ‘India’. Other territorial descriptions referred to India’s coastal areas and ports. Knowledge of interior regions was fairly limited.
5 The word ‘Hindu’ can be traced to its origins in the Old Persian and Avestic languages. According to Steingass’ A Comprehensive Persian–English Dictionary, the word ‘Hindu’ means ‘an Indian’, ‘black’, ‘slave’, ‘servant’ and ‘infidel’ (1947: 14–15). The Aryans first used the word Sindhus to refer to the modern Indus river. In Vedic literature Sindhu was used as an appellative noun for ‘river’ in general. Persians in the eighth century referred to the river as ‘Hindu’ (al Faruqi and Sopher 1974: 73) and by extension used the same word to describe those who lived beyond the Sind or the Indus Valley (Ling 1985: 142).
6 By the sixteenth century Indians were of course not the first or the only ‘other’ known to Europeans. The Spanish encounters with Indians in the Americas predate Spanish, Portuguese and British experiences of Indians in Asia.
7 By Indian religion European scholars meant primarily Hinduism and neglected Buddhism and Islam in such discussions (Marshall 1970; Iden 1990). British designation of ‘Hinduism’ as the religion of India and Sanskrit as the sacred language of India reveal the sources of European knowledge about India. English civil servants like Jones and Hulhed relied on Brahmin priests to learn Sanskrit from and for selection and translations of Indian texts. Scholars (Mukherji 1985) have argued that ‘too little attention has been paid to the Indian contribution’ (Mukherji in Rocher 1989: 627) in the project of British Orientalism. In the eighteenth-century India, numerous pandits (Hindu Brahmin priests) and maulavis (Muslim religious experts) entered British service, particularly in British courts as interpreters of Hindu and Muslim law (Rocher 1989).

8 Jones, however was not the first European to read Sanskrit or translate Indian texts. The French scholar Anquetil-Duperron went to India in 1754 and made translations of the Upanishads (Schwab 1984).

9 Surmised to have been composed in South India in early tenth century AD. It is by far the most popular of all the Puranas. The latter literally mean ‘ancient stories or lore’. As part of Hindu sacred literature, they contain popular encyclopedic collections of myth, legend and genealogy, varying greatly as to date and origin.

10 Literally ‘The Lord’s Song’. A part of the Indian epic poem Mahabharata, it is a dialogue between the warrior prince Arjuna and his friend and charioteer Lord Krishna. It has been dated to the first or second century AD.

11 Indology as a study of Indian civilization was not a monolithic set of ideas. Besides German, French and English varieties of Indology, individualistic interpretations lent further heterogeneity to Indological discourses.

12 According to Alvares:

This myth of the absolutist nature of Indian philosophy was repeated so often everybody came to accept it as gospel truth: the average Hindu was turned into a dreamy visionary and his philosophy into a world-and-life denying dogma.

(1991: 47)

13 In Majeed 1990, quoted from Lord Teignmouth’s Memoirs of the Life, Writings and Correspondence of Sir William Jones, 1804.

14 A similar argument can be made about Marx’s, Hegel’s and Weber’s writings on India. Their agendas were larger than a particular concern with India. In European philosophical, political, religious and economical debates, India was used both as data and as a testing ground for theories. Regardless of their explicit motivations for focusing on India, it is nonetheless crucial that their pronouncements have critically shaped imaginings and discourses of India, including the anthropological.

15 The word ‘caste’ is not one of Indian origin and is not traceable to any Indian language. The Indian application of the word caste comes from the Portuguese casta which means ‘race, bred or lineage’.

Indological accounts of caste in India refer to the varna system, a classificatory scheme found in Vedic texts. The four-fold occupational division in the Laws of Manu has been described by Indologists as a scheme of elaborate and rigid social classification. This interpretation reveals European reliance upon Vedic textual sources and Brahmins as the religious authority in India.

However, Indian scholars have questioned such a presentation of caste. Srinivas (1951) has argued that the real unit of the ‘caste system’ is not varna but goti, which he defines as ‘a very small endogamous group practising a traditional occupation and enjoying a certain amount of cultural, ritual and juridical autonomy’ (ibid.: 24). He further questions the rigidity of the caste system in Indological accounts (ibid.: 30).

16 An identical relationship between caste and Hinduism has been assumed by scholars from Max Weber to Monier-Williams to Louis Dumont. Weber (1958: 29), relying on written sources concluded ‘Before anything else, without caste there is no Hindu.’
Srinivas, however, sees caste as the 'structural' basis of Hinduism... (which) occasionally even survives conversion to Christianity.

17 In contrast to Surajit Sinha's (and also Dube 1971) dating of the origins of Indian anthropology to 1774 which coincides with the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Sarana and Dharmi Sinha (1976, 210) attribute the birth of Indian anthropology to the late nineteenth century.

18 In early twentieth century, Indian scholars like S.C. Roy and L.K. Ananthakrishna Iyer undertook studies of Indian castes and tribes in the tradition of administrator-anthropologists. This focus on tribal populations such as the Oraon, the Munda, the Birhor, among others, continued well into the 1940s. In these studies, the tribal populations were constructed as the 'other' by pioneering Indian anthropologists.

19 The first department of Sociology in India was set up in Bombay in 1919. The boundaries between sociology and anthropology in India, both historically and today, are not as rigid as in parts of Europe and North America. Practitioners of both disciplines acknowledge great areas of overlap (Betelie 1993; Patel 2002) but others assert a distinction between them (Gulha 1989). It is quite common for anthropologists and sociologists in India to cross over disciplinary boundaries, both in their research and teaching. The best known example of this is the Indian scholar, M.N. Srinivas who is appropriated by both disciplines.

20 Efforts to create an anthropology or sociology peculiar to India or South Asia have not occupied only Indian scholars. In 1957 the combined efforts of Louis Dumont and David Pocock 'for a sociology of India' led to the establishment of the most prestigious social science Indian journal today, Contributions to Indian Sociology. They argued that Indian sociology should lie at 'the confluence of sociology and indology'. This has proved to be a highly controversial proposition, generating tremendous debates among both Indian and non-Indian scholars (Peirano 1991). In recent years Mekhm Marriott's (1989, 1990) call for an 'Indian ethnoscience', in addition to being highly controversial has led to lively debates about both the need for an 'Indian' social science and its content. The fact that both these debates spanning the last thirty years have been made by 'non-Indians' has not gone unnoticed by Indian scholars, which gives the latter greater cause to insist on independence from Western intellectual influences.

21 My discussion of Indian anthropology is confined to what is labelled cultural anthropology in North America. Physical anthropology and archaeology are included in the teaching curriculum of Indian anthropology. Linguistics is only just beginning to make inroads in anthropology curriculum in India.

22 D. Sen phrases the problem thus:

Cultural anthropology, like other branches of Anthropology, has been imported from the West. Therefore, it is expected there will be a lag in catching up with the latest trend in the field in the west.

(1974: 57)

23 In 1963 the publication of Anthropology on the March aimed to 'arouse the interest of many, and in particular, of those who are interested in the welfare of tribes and backward communities'. In a different but related vein, in 1968, Indian social scientists organized a conference on the subject of 'Urgent Research in Social Anthropology'. In the introductory address N. Ray stated, 'We have assembled here for one brief week to consider and define in theoretical and practical terms the priorities of research problems in the field of social anthropology in India in the near future, and to suggest and plan, as precisely as possible, practicable ways and means by which scarce resources can be brought to bear on selected problem-areas and geographic regions.'

24 Some Indian theorists have queried the need for an Indian anthropology or sociology (Atal 1976; Ray 1989). While they legitimate theorizing in particular contexts, they argue that anthropology's status as a 'universal' science makes it difficult to propose its national variants. The reasons for this are not entirely clear to me. The invocation of
Maximal varieties in anthropology is not a new idea. Anthropologists in Great Britain and the United States have claimed national differences in their profession. More recently anthropologists in parts of the Arab world (J. Abu-Lughod 1989), Italy (Saunders 1984) and Japan (Kelly 1991; Kuwayama 2003, 2004) have similarly claimed regional and national specificities in their practice of anthropology.

25 Anthropologists from other Third World countries also use this label synonymously with the phrase 'Third World Anthropologist' (Bennoune 1985). Both these labels are used variously to signify a differential identity from First World anthropologists.

26 Anthropologists in newly independent India were joined by sociologists, political scientists and economists, similarly engaged in redefining their disciplines vis-a-vis the nationalist project of rebuilding India.

27 The point is made forcefully by Sahay:

It is high time that the anthropologists also feel this urge and feel themselves concerned with the burning and practical problems, which not only face any particular cross section of society, but the country or its people as a whole. With their specialized knowledge of culture, they should come forward to suggest solutions of the problems like unemployment, population-explosion, crisis of conscience disintegration, lack of national character, and be of real help in successful implementation of some national programmes of our...Prime Minister (Indira Gandhi), and the like.

(1976: 17)

28 Verrier Elwin, an English missionary turned anthropologist, served as an advisor on tribal affairs to Jawaharlal Nehru. Upon the advise of the former, Nehru devised a plan for the appropriate administration of tribes in India. Elwin's contributions have taken on the proportion of a 'myth'/'legend' in Indian anthropological circles, but were at the time vehemently opposed by some Indian anthropologists. Amongst them was G.S. Ghurye who argued that the best solution to the tribal 'problem' was to assimilate them into mainstream Hindu society. Keeping them in isolated 'national parks' he elaborated would lead to accusations that anthropologists were trying to keep the tribes 'primitive' to facilitate their discipline's interests.

29 The varied attempts to indigenize sociology in Taiwan (Chan 1993; Sun 1993; Yeh 1994), Japan (Kuwayama 2003, 2004) and China (Guldin 1995) provide interesting comparative material.

References


