The Historical Anthropology of Surajit Sinha

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I

In his Presidential address to the Anthropology and Archaeology Section of the 49th session of the Indian Science Congress at Cuttack in 1962, Surajit Sinha spoke on 'State formation and Rajput myth in tribal central India'. The research for the paper had been carried out during his post-doctoral project on state formation among the Bhumij of Manbhum district, enabling him to build on his earlier ethnography of the Bhumij which had been reported in his doctoral dissertation at Northwestern University.\(^1\) In his address the Bhumij case served to anchor a comparative perspective with the Mundas and Gonds of central India. A combined use of historical records and ethnographic observations was unprecedented in the study of tribal formations at the time.

A.M. Shah’s survey of literature on ‘Historical Sociology’ published as part of the ICSSR sponsored survey of research in sociology and social anthropology, was an early effort to delineate a nascent field. Though deficient in its outlook and coverage, it remains one of the few attempts to take stock of the literature on historical sociology in India. Shah’s notion of history was largely governed by the structural-functional view in sociology and proved to be overtly restrictive. Much of the historically inclined sociological writings like Ghurye’s work on Konikand, Kapadia’s work on Navsari, Kolenda’s longitudinal study of family structures in Lonikand, Gould’s work on Faizabad municipality, Fox’s work on Rajput segmentary lineages in Uttar Pradesh as well as Sinha’s work on Bhumij state formation, did not find a mention in Shah’s survey.\(^2\) It was not as if all these authors were uniformly ignored. Ghurye was cited several times but his book on Loni was absent. It was similar in other cases too. But underlying the exclusions was a view of history which

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1 Surajit Sinha’s Ph.D dissertation was entitled ‘The Acculturation of the Bhumij of Manbhum: A Study in Social Class Formation & Ethnic Integration’ and was successfully submitted to Northwestern University in 1956 under the supervision of Prof. M. Herskovits.

following Radcliffe-Brown distinguished between ‘conjectural history’ and scientific history’. Structural-functional anthropology was ill-disposed towards evolutionism which sought to trace the origins of social institutions and compare their evolution in different societies. However, these accounts were often speculative or based on circumstantial evidence and hence derided by the later functionalists as conjectural or pseudo history. In contrast scientific history was based on written records which could be objectively verified. Clearly then, for the tribals who did not maintain written records there was little possibility of historical reconstruction. They constituted the ‘people without history’. In this vein Shah (1974: 433) notes,

"Primitive tribes had no tradition of writing, and there was, therefore, no meaning of knowing the nature of their past social institutions."

Given the above notion of history it was not surprising that Sinha’s work on tribal state formation was ignored.

II

Surajit Sinha came to anthropology from geology. After completing his matriculation in 1942 he initially enrolled in Physics (Hons.) at Calcutta’s Presidency College for his undergraduate degree. But after a year he shifted to Geology. During one of his geological field trips he became interested in tribal culture after watching the Santals dance at Gaitkunda. Earlier during the evacuation of Calcutta in 1942, he had accompanied his maternal uncle, painter Rathin Maitra on a tour of the Chota Nagpur area, following in the footsteps of the Archers (W.G. and Mildred). But it was not the decay of tribal life which attracted him, it was their high philosophy as expressed in their Jhumpur songs.³

The transition from geology to anthropology was effected by the promptings of Prof. Nirmal Kumar Bose. Sinha joined the post-graduate classes in anthropology without informing his parents. Only later did his father come to know that he was not continuing with geology but had shifted to anthropology. After his post-graduation in anthropology, Sinha was appointed a research scholar in Calcutta University during 1950-52. During this time he worked on the socio-economic adaptation and rehabilitation of the East Bengal

³ Biographical details of Prof. Surajit Sinha was collected during an informal conversation with him and Dr. (Mrs.) Purnima Sinha in early February 1999, in Calcutta.
refugees who had been sent to the Andaman Islands. His report laid the basis for the
government’s rehabilitation policy in the Andaman Islands. In 1953 appointed a lecturer in
social anthropology he taught briefly at his alma mater before leaving to do his doctoral work
in anthropology at Northwestern University.

Evanston, Illinois, where Northwestern University is located is one of the suburbs of
Chicago. During his stay there Sinha made contact with the anthropology department of the
University of Chicago. It was the time when Redfield was involved in extending his project
on comparative civilisations to South Asia. This would lead Milton Singer and Mckim
Marriott to the study of the urban centre and village as aspects of India’s complex and
multilayered civilisation. Redfield and Marriott became good friends of Sinha. This
association with Chicago anthropology’s formative interest in South Asia left a deep imprint
on Sinha’s work. His concern for the civilisational dimension of tribal cultures has
continued.

On the completion of his Ph.D. Sinha returned to India in September 1956 to continue
his research on the Bhumij with a post-doctoral grant from Ford Foundation. It was the time
when he focused on state formation among tribal communities. By this time his interests had
shifted from adaptation and acculturation processes to social differentiation and the
emergence of centralised organisations of power among tribal groups.

A year after his return Sinha joined the Anthropological Survey of India (ASI) as
Prof. Nirmal Kumar Bose his old teacher now the Director of ASI, persuaded him to join
the Survey and assist him (Bose) to carry out a major project on the cultural zones in India.
He worked for five years with the survey before leaving for the USA again.

Between 1961-1964 he spent a year each at the University of Chicago, Duke
University and Stanford University respectively. While he taught at Chicago and Duke, he
spent a sabbatical year at the Centre for Advanced Studies in the Behavioural Sciences at
Palo Alto. Many of his well known essays were composed during this period and published in
a range of books and periodicals. During his stay in the USA, he was also able to do a short
stint of fieldwork in an affluent midwestern village which he called Mapletown.

On his return to India Sinha joined the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta, for
a brief stint of teaching during 1965. The next year he went back to the ASI. After
becoming the director of the ASI, Sinha initiated a programme for ethnographically studying
various aspects of the social and cultural life of people in Calcutta. From the ASI, Sinha was
appointed Vice Chancellor of Visva Bharati University in 1975. On the completion of his
term there he became the Professor of Social Anthropology and Director at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences Calcutta. He retired from the Centre upon the expiry of his term as Director in 1985. While at the Centre, Sinha published a small monograph on Prof. N.K. Bose. The monograph was a tribute and an appreciation of his mentor’s itenerant wisdom and vision. Like the wandering wise man, Bose was a traveller through time and space, a restless intellect always in search of new goals, the quintessential paribrajak (wanderer).

III

The biographical details given above afford some clues to Sinha’s interest in historical anthropology. His training in cultural anthropology in the USA, as well as his civilisational concerns fostered both by Prof. N.K. Bose as well as Chicago anthropology of Redfield’s era contributed to developing a historical sensibility. Cultural anthropology in North America deriving from the Boasian heritage was not averse to history as British structural-functionalism was. Moreover, Herskovits who was his dissertation adviser in Northwestern University was attuned to historical reconstruction as is evident from his work on Dahomey. Consequently Sinha’s inclination towards historical and processual analysis remained distinctive. As he was dealing with tribal communities who relied primarily on oral traditions and transmission, and tried to reconstruct their traditions and institutional practices from genealogies, songs, myths, performances and other oral sources. He also utilised the records of the colonial administrators like Dalton, Risley, Munshee Nandjee, and others. But Sinha’s account of the Bhunij was not based primarily on archival sources. The ‘field’ was his archive and he sought to work outwards from existing practices and compared that with practices recorded earlier by colonial ethnographers. This was much closer to the ethnohistory or historical anthropology of Bernard Cohn in Chicago than the history of the functionalist ethnographers.

To Cohn ethnohistory had come to mean, the historical study of any non-European peoples. Utilizing documentary, oral and archaeological sources and the conceptual framework and insights of cultural and social anthropology, these study, attempt to reconstruct the history of indigenous people before and after European contact (Cohn 1968: 440).

Ethnohistorians compiled their histories from multiple sources along with doing ethnographic fieldwork among the people whose histories they sought to reconstruct. Their purpose was
to construct ‘rounded’ histories which would take into account the social and cultural systems and practices of the indigenous people. The effort was to textualise practices and not rely only on codified texts, thereby bringing the ‘book’ view and ‘field’ view into creative tension. To try to perceive historical events from the position of the aborigine rather than that of the European administrator (Cohn 1968: 441).

This enabled the ethnohistorian to map out the changes that occurred in aboriginal societies before contact with the Europeans, thereby unsettling notions of stability and stagnation among them. As Cohn mention, not only were there small-scale cyclical changes in terms of the growth and fission of extended families and lineages but there were also larger scale changes through conquest and migration.

Cohn’s ideas of ethnohistory or historical anthropology were further extended by Dirks (1987) in his study of a ‘little kingdom’ (Pudukkottai) in South India. Reflecting on the hybrid nature of the ethnohistorical enterprise and its methodological import Dirks notes that,

Ethnohistory unites a concern for the social and cultural forms studied by anthropologists with the multiple contexts and temporal dimensions invoked and identified by historians .... Ethnohistory must operate as a reflexive critical technique, challenging our basic pre-suppositions at every point. (Dirks 1987: 10-11).

History was to be viewed more as a process than chronology and was fundamental to the concern with practice. And fieldwork implied the

Production of new texts and the construction of related contexts: contexts of power, interest, motivation, intention, meaning and action (Dirks 1987: 15).

This constant destabilisation of history by ethnography and vice versa was not only meant to yield deeper and richer understanding of the dynamics of pre-industrial cultures but also to shed light on its present. Hence contexts were not to be considered as backdrops but as the constituter of meanings. To underscore the point that knowledge through use begins with context, Dirks quotes Mintz (Dirks 1987: 16) thus,

I don’t think meaning inhere in substances naturally or inevitably. Rather, I believe that meanings arise out of use, as people use substances in social relationships.

This ethnohistorical method is a far cry from the functionalist continuities of historical sociology.
It is not my purpose to elaborate on the method of ethnohistory or historical anthropology in abstraction but to contend that Sinha’s work on state formation among the Bhumij presaged some of the same issues in India.

IV

Sinha’s work on state formation among the Bhumij argued that class stratification had already taken root among them in terms of differentiated land holding and the territorial extend of political dominance before the British incursions into their territory. The social organisation of the Bhumij in Pargana Barabhum was stratified into several levels. At the bottom were the Khuntkattı settlers or the ordinary cultivators who were designated as Nichu Bhumij. More substantial cultivators were known as the Tanbedars. Above them were the Chatwal of a village who were known as Nagadi Bhumij. Beyond the village were the Sadiyals who controlled about 12 villages and came from among the Nagadi Bhumij. Above the Sadiyals were the Tara Sardars of the larger Tarafs who controlled from 35 to 97 villages, and were known as Afaiasha Bhumij. Some of the bigger Tara Sardars were able to acquire the status of Rajput-Kshatriya of Dashmahal grade from them Afaiasha Bhumij ranks. Finally at the top was the Raja or Zamindar of the Pargana who held sway over 596 villages comprising the Pargana and were known as Rajput-Kshatriya of Namahal grade.

In his paper Sinha indicates how changes in economic class positions had brought about changes in status designations made evident through conduct of ritual observances and gift giving to Brahmans. But in his effort to reconstruct the Bhumij power structure, Sinha constantly juxtaposes the textual histories with his observed processes thereby deriving new meanings from old contexts. His point is to show how economic and status differentiation was not introduced by the British but had prevailed in the pre-contact period. Thereby putting paid to the notion of undifferentiated and homogenous tribal communities. At the same time delineating through their cultural observances how the Bhumij were also part of a wider Hindu civilisation with its attendant hierarchies.