



Anthropology in India: A brief viewpoint

- M.D. Kalam -

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Dr. Kalam focuses on the evolution of anthropological studies in India. Briefly, his main idea is that anthropology has been used as an instrument for policy makers, especially to promote social integration. This idea enables us to understand why anthropology has sometimes taken a direction towards compartmentalising social reality.

1- Historical background of anthropology in India

The first point of Dr. Kalam's presentation deals with the historical background of this discipline. In order to understand anthropology, one should keep in mind the very origin of anthropology in India. Originally anthropology began with the British Raj. It was essentially an instrument of the British administrators to govern. However, Indian anthropology survives decolonisation. But some trends remain from this origin.

Anthropology was very often perceived as a method of classification of social groups such as tribes, castes, religious groups, etc. Furthermore, in physical anthropology research uses instruments for racial classification through the use of anthropometry.

2- Evolution of the anthropological topics.

Traditionally, Indian anthropology has dealt with studies on tribes and with the rural world. Briefly three periods can be outlined. Indian anthropology began with surveys on tribes, then went on to village studies and then to study of caste and allied aspects.

Why study these topics? Because traditionally anthropology is seen as a study of the "other". Distance between the anthropologist and the people being studied is required. In the case of European anthropology, the "other" can be the "natives" from very different and very distant countries. In the case of Indian anthropologists, because of the diversity of the Indian society, the other belongs to the same country. But they are still perceived as such, because they are very different from the observant. Taking the example of the tribes topic, Dr. Kalam explains that tribes are seen as small scale and homogeneous entities. Once more the aim is to classify as simply as possible. Furthermore, the very concept of tribes is seen as a relevant one, because tribes are denominated as S.T. in the Constitution of India itself. According to Dr. Kalam, this kind of anthropology can sometimes lead to an oversimplification of the differences within the Indian society. Taking the example of the tribes topic, Dr. Kalam explains that one should understand that this very generic term covers many differences and many varieties.

In order to administer the country, it is convenient to classify groups in generic terms, but it gives a superficial idea of the Indian society. In addition this approach exaggerates the differences between the observant and the subjects studied. Distance could be a key element in anthropology, but this distance should be taken mentally by the observant. In another way, we could say that the Other can be found in the very society of the observant.

Dr. Kalam gives an example from his research on communalism in India.

3 - Communalism in India as an example

According to Dr. Kalam, studies on communalism are usually analysed within the context of religious tensions between Hindus and Muslim groups. However, religion is just a part of the causes of riots but not the single cause. Dr. Kalam has observed that in almost each case of social tensions, leading sometimes to communal clashes, the economic position of Muslims has risen recently. Consequently these tensions must be seen from an economic basis too. rather than a simple religious one.

[M.D. KALAM](#), le 25 mai 1998