

TARAK CHANDRA DAS (1898-1964): A FORGOTTEN ANTHROPOLOGIST

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Tarak Chandra Das was a pioneering Indian anthropologist during the formative period of the discipline and is largely forgotten by his successors. He made immense contributions through his meticulous fieldwork and theoretical insights on the applications of anthropology in India. His three major contributions are described and analyzed in this article from an anthropological perspective. It is revealed from the analysis that Das's contributions in Indian anthropology is still relevant having immense theoretical potential, since he moved beyond structural-functional theory and the study of small communities towards a dynamic approach for undertaking complex socio-economic problems like Bengal Famine of 1943.

Introduction

Tarak Chandra Das is a great anthropologist and he also happens to be one of the worst victims of institutional amnesia, which is a characteristic feature of the centres of higher learning in India. Nothing is truer than the oblivious behaviour of the Indian anthropologists towards T. C. Das. The two *Directories of Indian Anthropologists*, one compiled and edited by Dr. Sachin Roy and published in 1970 on behalf of the Indian Anthropological Association and the other edited by A. Basu, M. P. Basu and A. K. Adhikary in 1981 published by the Anthropological Survey of India did not include the name of T. C. Das^{1,2}. The Directory entitled *Anthropologists in India* edited by Dr. Sachin Roy contains the names of Nirmal Kumar Bose (1901-1972), Irawati Karve (1905-1970) and D. N. Majumdar (1903-1960) in pages 11-12, 29-30 and 33 respectively. The other book, the *Directory of Anthropologists* edited by Basu, et.al., contains profiles of 552 anthropologists of India, prepared

on the basis of the responses of the individual scholars to the mailed questionnaires sent by the editors during 1978. So, this Directory had no scope to include the name of T.C. Das who passed away in the year 1964.

The Sachin Roy book contains a 'Foreword' by Professor L. P. Vidyarthi who was the President of the Indian Anthropological Association and later wrote a comprehensive history of Indian Anthropology in two volumes. In the second section of his long Foreword (about 12 pages), nowhere did Vidyarthi mention the original and pioneering monographs on Purum Kukis and Bengal Famine written by T. C. Das, although he cited the works of Nirmal Kumar Bose, K. P. Chattopadhyay, D. N. Majumdar, Verrier Elwin and C. Von Furer-Haimendorf as important personalities towards the making of Indian Anthropology during its constructive period (1921-1948)³. L. P. Vidyarthi's *magnum opus*, *Rise of Anthropology in India* (1978) includes descriptions of the works of T. C. Das especially in vol. I while vol. II of the book has a full chapter (chapter VII) on the biographical 'Profiles of Indian Anthropologists' along with the life-sketches and chronological list of publications of eleven eminent

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anthropologists of India, including K. P. Chattopadhyay, N. K. Bose, D. N. Majumdar, Irawati Karve and others but not T. C. Das³.

In this context it would be relevant to mention about the University Grants Commission's *Model Curriculum in Anthropology* published in 2001. The *Model Curriculum* was prepared by the Curriculum Development Committee(CDC) in Anthropology constituted by UGC and was sent to all the Universities of India which had Anthropology as a subject at the post-graduate level. In the syllabus for B.A. /B.Sc. there is a section on the 'History of Anthropology in India: Pioneers in Indian Anthropology' in paper 4 entitled 'Indian Anthropology', The 'illustrative list' of pioneers which is given in the syllabus contains names of 15 anthropologists and sociologists including B.S. Guha, L A K Aiyar, D. N. Majumdar, and Irawati Karve among others. Significantly, the names of T. C. Das and N. K. Bose are not given in the list.⁴ The name of N.K. Bose, however has found a place in the syllabus of the *Model Curriculum* under paper 7 entitled 'Theories in Social-Cultural Anthropology' among 18 foreign and Indian anthropologists including A. L. Kroeber, B. Malinowski, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, D. N. Majumdar, Irawati Karve S. C. Dube and others. T. C. Das is the missing personality in this list too⁴. The same story is repeated in all the successive pages of the *Model Curriculum* in the compulsory and elective courses of the post-graduate syllabi, in the papers on 'Tribal Cultures of India', 'Tribal Development'⁴ as well as in 'Applied Social-Cultural Anthropology'⁴ and in the papers in Diploma courses on 'Anthropological Methodology' and 'Ethnographic Field Investigation and Research Techniques'⁴. We do not find the name of Tarak Chandra Das, who was one of the most brilliant, socially responsible and ground-breaking Indian anthropologist in the Pre-Independence period. It is really distressing that in the whole syllabi of the *Model Curriculum* and Recommended List of Readings prepared by the apex policy making body of higher education in India Das could not find a place.

Contributions of T.C.Das

The only comprehensive available account of the list of publications of T. C. Das including a short life-sketch was prepared not by an anthropologist or a sociologist but by the Reference Librarian in the Central Library of the Anthropological Survey of India, Mr. Shyamal Kumar Ray, in his invaluable book *Bibliographies of Eminent Indian Anthropologists (with Life-Sketches)* published by the Anthropological Survey of India in July, 1974. The volume contains the list of publications and short life-sketches of

12 eminent Indian anthropologists including Tarak Chandra Das⁵. It begins with L. K. Ananthakrishna Iyer (1861-1937) and S. S. Sarkar (1908-1969) as the last anthropologist covering a span of more than one hundred years if we take the year of birth of Iyer and the year of death of Sarkar at the two ends of the continuum. T. C. Das falls somewhere in the middle of the continuum. What strikes even a casual observer is that in the life-sketches of these 12 eminent anthropologists except T. C. Das the author could cite the dates of demise of all the other anthropologists! The year of birth of T. C. Das was also mentioned differently in two books. While Shyamal Kumar Ray recorded Das' year of birth in 1898 while Surajit Sinha in his edited book *Field Studies on the People of India* published in 1978 mentioned it as 1897⁶. Sinha however gave the date of demise of his teacher as 26 July 1964⁶.

In any case, from the short life-sketch of T.C. Das we came to know that he earned his M.A. degree from the Calcutta University in 'Ancient Indian History and Culture' and joined the newly founded Department of Anthropology at the Calcutta University in 1921 as a research scholar and then he became lecturer in 1923 and finally retired from the rank of Reader in the Department in 1963. Das conducted extensive fieldworks in Chotanagpur in the then Bihar and in Assam. He also conducted fieldwork to assess the impact of industrialization in Birlapur in West Bengal, wrote thought provoking articles containing anthropological and sociological analyses on Bengal dowry restriction bill of 1940 and Hindu code bill in the years 1940 and 1944 along with articles on the practical suggestions for the improvement of museums in India and an empirical article on the fish-gorge in Bengal in the prestigious journals like *Modern Review*, *Calcutta Review* and *Ethnos*. He was very much interested in the application of Anthropology and had a great reputation as a teacher and trainer in field methods.

The publications of T. C. Das spanned over a period of 41 years from 1922-1963. He began to write academic articles in Anthropology when he was 24 and wrote his last article in 1963, a year before his death. Bibliographical records of T. C. Das show that he had 42 publications that is one in every year of his academic career. He published 31 full-length articles, 2 books, 6 abstracts, two jointly authored books and one joint article.⁵ The national and international journals in which he published were prestigious and they included *Man*, *Anthropos*, *Ethnos*, *Calcutta Review*, *Modern Review*, *Sociological Bulletin*, *Journal of Social Research*, *Journal of the Department of Letters* and *Anthropological Papers* of the University of Calcutta. Apart from kinship and social organization, his areas of research interest display remarkable diversity which

ranged between sun-worship⁷, the disposal of dead among the tribals⁸, improvement of museums⁹, scheme for tribal welfare¹⁰, impact of industrialization on peasantry¹¹ to an anthropological analysis of Bengal dowry restriction bill¹².

From 1922 to 1940, that is about 18 years of his active academic life Das did not venture to write any significant article on the application of social anthropology for the welfare and improvement of the communities and cultures he had studied. His main research interest during this period was to record and study the different aspects of culture and social organization of the tribal and non-tribal communities of the eastern and north-eastern parts of India. In this period he conducted fieldwork and published on the Ho, Bhumij, Kharia, Chiru, Bathuri and Purum Kuki. His paper in prestigious international journals of Anthropology like *Anthropos*, *Man*, and *Ethnos* had been published during this period.

The Contemporary and Theoretical Relevance of the Works of T.C. Das

The Indian Science Congress Lecture : The year 1941 can be regarded as a major turning point in the academic career of T. C. Das. In 1941, he delivered the Sectional President's address in the Anthropology Section of the Indian Science Congress. The lecture was a 29 page full-length paper entitled 'Cultural Anthropology in the Service of the Individual and the Nation'. This paper can be regarded as one of the pioneering articles on applied anthropology in India, although neither L. P. Vidyarthi nor Surajit Sinha mentioned about this significant contribution in their articles on Indian anthropology.^{13, 3} In the address, Das elaborately charted out the future path of Indian anthropology with a rich description of the social dynamics of the tribal and peasant societies in India in the context of the role of anthropologists in nation building¹⁴. The Science Congress paper is not only a lecture, but it is also very much relevant in the present Indian context.

In this lecture Das's major objective was to convince his readers about the immense potential of social-cultural anthropology as applied science for the overall development of the Indian population. In the five sub-sections of the lecture, Das dealt with the application of anthropology in almost all the important sectors of a modern nation, viz. trade, industry, agriculture, legislation, education, social service and administration. With the help of concrete empirical findings either from his own field experiences or from the ethnographic accounts of world renowned social anthropologists (e.g. Lucy Mair, Felix Keesing, Issac Schepera, H. I. Hogbin, B. Malinowski) Das justified the inclusion of anthropologists in policy making bodies and

application of anthropological knowledge in every sphere of nation building.¹⁴ In order to substantiate his arguments, Das had used rather unconventional sources of data, like Mahatma Gandhi's 1937 article published in *Harijan* about the adverse effects of the methods adopted by the Christian missionaries to convert the economically poorer classes of the Hindu population in different parts of India¹⁴. N. K. Bose's paper entitled 'Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption' was presented as a lecture in the same Science Congress of 1941 in which T. C. Das delivered the sectional presidential address in Anthropology. Bose's lecture was later published in the journal *Science and Culture* and in course of time, became famous in Indian Anthropology while Das's lecture dealing with the role of anthropology in solving the burning and practical problems of nation building went into oblivion among the anthropologists in India.

One of the most vital sections in the lecture of Das was on the role of anthropologists in building up a proper type of educational system suitable for the real needs of a particular community in the Indian context. The great anthropologist had the courage to write strong words regarding the colossal wastage of public money by the then colonial government for the establishment of schools among the tribal people. Let us hear in his words.

Education is perhaps rightly claimed as the panacea of all evils that befall mankind. But people differ in its definition, and naturally it has different types. There is one kind of education which uplifts the individual morally and intellectually and makes him fit for the struggle for existence. There is another kind of education which is intended for the exploitation of the so-called educated. There is a third type of education which the enthusiasts in their zeal for ameliorating the condition of the poor and the ill-fated impose upon them without considering their necessity or capacity. We have neither time nor inclination to discuss this point here but suffice it to say that much labour and more public money have been squandered and are still being squandered in imparting education which does neither suit the people nor help them to put a morsel of food into their mouth¹⁴.

Had he stopped here the above words would at best been regarded as a fine piece of journalistic remark on our educational system. But Das then narrated from his own rich field experiences in Manipur valley of North eastern India about the adverse social impact of the establishment of a network of primary schools and a few high English schools. To quote Das again.

The two schools I saw used to teach their students how to read and write Mehei besides a little arithmetic,

which they managed to forget within a few months after their departure from the school. it is difficult to understand how high school education will help Manipuri agriculture or textile industry. The employments at the disposal of the State are very limited and the students who pass out of these schools every year will increase the number of unemployed as they no longer think of going back to their fields. During the first few years they will be idolized by the community but this will soon pass away when they will be looked upon as parasites and it is not impossible that they will be a source of trouble to the State.¹⁴ Consider this insightful observation of Das in connection with the active participation of the English educated youth in the ethnic and secessionist movements that developed in this region of India after the Independence. Das strongly advocated that in this type of situations the advice of the experienced and trained anthropologists is required in the Herculean task of educating the tribal and other underprivileged communities in a diverse country like India.

I would end my discussion on the lecture with two observations.

First, Das probably was the first Indian anthropologist to advocate the indispensable role of social-cultural anthropology in nation building by combining micro-level field observations within a macro framework which is still lacking among the majority of Indian anthropologists.

Second, it is true that Das in his endeavour to apply anthropological knowledge to solve practical problems largely adopted a functional view of culture the followers of which believed that society behaves more or less like a biological organism. Does it mean that Das was a devoted follower of the then British functionalism propounded by Malinowski? Did Das reject the role of historical and/or archival methods of interpretation in dealing with his field data? We will explore these questions later in this article.

The Studies on Purum Kuki and Bengal Famine :

Two valuable books written by T.C. Das not only bears testimony of his meticulous observation and collection of data through fieldwork but these works has immense theoretical and methodological potential to generate future research in anthropological advocacy and policymaking . One is, *The Purums: An Old Kuki Tribe of Manipur*¹⁵ and the other *Bengal Famine*¹⁶.

Purum Kuki : The Purum monograph was one of the most comprehensive works produced by any anthropologist on the life of a small tribe and it became a major source of data for a number of world renowned social anthropologists of Great Britain and USA in later

years. Unfortunately, both the foreign and the Indian anthropologists concentrated more on the theoretical aspects of Das's Purum study leaving aside its applied dimensions which was emphasized by him in the concluding chapter of the book¹⁵.

I would begin my discussion with L.P. Vidyarthi's reading of the Purum monograph, since he is the lone anthropologist who emphasized the applied dimension of Das's work on the tribe. Vidyarthi in the first volume of his book *Rise of Anthropology in India* described in detail about the findings of Das in the different chapters of the monograph with much admiration for its meticulousness and penetrating analyses. In the final part of his description, Vidyarthi discussed about the suggestions advanced by Das for the betterment of the Purums.³ For Vidyarthi, with the publication of the Purum book T.C. Das 'set an example of a systematic presentation of ethnographic data.'³ He concluded the discussion on Das's monograph with the following comment.

*His monograph, though not well known to Indian scholars, remains a piece of meticulous fieldwork and penetrative analysis. It will continue to serve as a model for ethnographic research in anthropology.*³

We would now look more closely into the concluding chapter of T.C. Das's book on the Purum Kuki. In the first part of his concluding chapter Das laid emphasis on the dynamic nature of Purum society which had undergone changes through historical times and also on the different aspects of Purum culture under various kinds of external influences.

Secondly, Das was keenly interested to understand the nature of the 'productive system'(he did not use the Marxian term *means of production* but it was clear that by the term 'productive system' he did not only refer to technology and material culture) in a dynamic rather than in a functional framework.

Thirdly, without borrowing terms from the Western Marxist scholars mechanically, Das made a very sincere empirical attempt to record the processes by which the new productive system, characterized by plough and plains-land cultivation had begun to influence the different sectors of the Purum society, viz., inheritance, marriage and religion. Apart from looking into the internal sociocultural changes brought about by the adoption of the plough cultivation among the Purums, Das was also aware of the wider politicoeconomic forces which were at work in the region where this small tribe inhabited. He stated at the beginning of the section I of his concluding chapter.

*Though foreign merchandise has come to Purum home, it is still immune from the money-lenders of the plains. This is partly due to difficulties of transport and partly to the judicious laws of land tenure of the State as well as the nature of land-economy of the people. Investment is risky where there is no permanently cultivated land with a marketable value. Nobody would invest money against jhum fields and the Purums have nothing else from which the loan can be realized. The recent introduction of permanently cultivated fields will sooner or later change the situation and if the State also relinquishes the stringency of the land-laws the Purums will fall easy prey to the land-grabbers who are sure to flock to their home.*¹⁵

It is clearly evident that Das, unlike his contemporary British social anthropologists was mainly looking at the dynamics of the changing nature of the economy of the Purums, rather than the stable and structural-functional aspects of the kinship system of the tribe.

Bengal Famine : The book on the famine of Bengal which took place in 1943 was a unique and rare first-hand study done by any anthropologist or social scientist on the victims of one of the greatest tragedies of our country under the colonial rule. An earlier version of the book was discussed in the then British Parliament and some of the recommendations advanced by Das were adopted by the Famine Inquiry Commission in 1944 formed by the colonial government for the prevention of future famines in India.¹⁶ Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in his book *The Discovery of India* also mentioned about the anthropological survey conducted by Das on the famine affected population of Bengal and expressed his confidence on the results of the survey in contrast to the one carried out by the government.¹⁷ Ironically enough, the Nobel Laureate economist Amartya Sen though gave reference to Das's original work several times in his famous book *Poverty and Famines*¹⁸, did not mention about the explanatory and policy dimensions of this brilliant work.¹⁹ It would be relevant in this connection to mention about a recent work done by an American historian, Mark Tauger of the West Virginia University. Tauger has been studying Bengal Famine for quite a long time and in one of his recent papers, which has won the prestigious Wayne D. Rasmussen award by the *The Agricultural History Society* of USA in 2010, he described how Amartya Sen ignored the substantial amount of crop harvest data analysed by T.C. Das in his book on Bengal Famine.²⁰ In his paper 'The Indian Famine Crises of World War II' Tauger showed that Sen has used only one set of harvest data (the Famine Inquiry Commission's Report) to establish his theory of man-made famine. Das on the other hand, used four different estimates of the

average rice area and yield during the 1930s to arrive at a more objective assessment of the situation. But even after using different sources Das observed that the yield data for rice in Bengal widely varied and were rough and approximate estimates based on conjectures. Tauger noted this fact perceptively in his paper.

*I will focus on Das' book because Sen and other advocates of a "man-made" famine interpretation cite it. Das' evidence and arguments show that the "man-made" famine interpretation has a potentially major inconsistency in that it criticizes the British for bad decisions in dealing with the famine but accepts problematic and potentially politicized decisions by British officials about the size of the harvest. Das' discussion also undermines the evidence for that interpretation of the famine. The argument that the Bengal famine was "man-made" rests on Sen's calculations using essentially one set of data in the FIC report. Das shows that the data in the FIC report are just one of several different groups of estimates, none of which is based on any valid statistical studies, harvest measurements, samples, or similar sources.*²⁰

The subtitle of the book *Bengal Famine* is phrased in the following words: 'As revealed in a Survey of the Destitutes in Calcutta'. It is true that the book is the result of a survey undertaken by a team of anthropologists during 1943-44 in the Calcutta city and also in the villages of the ten districts of undivided Bengal. The idea of conducting a survey with a team of trained anthropologists was first conceived by T.C. Das in July-August of 1943 when hundreds of hungry destitute entered into the city of Calcutta in search of food. Das proposed the plan of the survey to his colleagues and prepared a detailed questionnaire and a team was formed with eleven trained anthropologists comprising the teachers and research students of the Department of Anthropology of the Calcutta University. The data thus collected were analysed and a preliminary report was written and a major part of the report was submitted to the Famine Inquiry Commission (constituted by the colonial government) in 1944 in the form of a memorandum. The report was later written in the form of a book by T.C. Das in July 1948 and was published in 1949 by the Calcutta University. *Bengal Famine*, therefore, is a unique example of team work under the leadership of T.C. Das by a dedicated group of university based anthropologists who were driven more by social and moral commitment than pure academic quest. This of course does not mean that the survey was conducted in a loose manner, that methodological rigors were sacrificed in order to conduct a rapid and quick appraisal of the situation. The team had no national or international funding

agency behind them; no political agenda was lying before them. The Calcutta University sanctioned a sum of Rs.500/- only to extend the survey in the rural areas of the ten districts of erstwhile undivided Bengal. In fact, the two chapters on methodology, which are the best portions of the book, reveal its strength. The chapter XI of the book entitled 'Causes of the Famine of 1943' is another treasure-house of the book which places *Bengal Famine* far above the category of a run-of-the-mill 'sample survey'. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in his book *The Discovery of India* (1946) mentioned about the survey on Bengal Famine before the publication of the book by T.C.Das and expressed his confidence on the results of the survey in contrast to the one carried out by the government. We quote Nehru.

*The Department of Anthropology of the Calcutta University carried out an extensive scientific survey of the sample groups in the famine areas. They arrived at the figure of about 3,400,000 total deaths by famine in Bengal... Official figures of the Bengal Government based largely on unreliable reports from village patwaris or headmen gave a much lower figure.*¹⁷

The field based study of the Bengal famine of 1943 conducted by T.C. Das, is not a typical anthropological study of a tribe or a village inhabited by several castes. It is unique in many respects. Let us enumerate the facts.

First, this is the only study done by a team of trained anthropologists under the leadership of T.C. Das on Bengal famine.

Second, the book which was written by Das has not received its due attention by the successive generation of anthropologists and sociologists in India.

Third, in this study Das and his co-fieldworkers employed traditional anthropological methods (e.g. genealogy, case history, participant observation) for the collection of data not from a specific tribe or caste in a rural setting, but from a scattered and heterogeneous group of human beings displaced from the different districts of undivided Bengal affected by the acute food shortage.

Fourth, the fieldwork and the survey on the famine affected population were carried out mainly in the city of Calcutta.

Fifth, the report and the recommendations based on the anthropological study of the famine in Bengal were taken into consideration by the policy makers and administrators at the highest level of governance.

Sixth, the explanation provided by Das on the causes of Bengal famine surpassed the prevalent anthropological interpretations of social events— evolutionary, diffusionist and structure-functional.

The final and not the least important fact about the book is the style of its presentation. Unlike the usual state of affairs in which the ethnographer described the material culture and social organization of tribal and caste villages, Das was tackling a much more complex situation in writing about Bengal famine. So, he had to adopt an innovative style of presentation

Taken together, the above facts have made Bengal Famine an unorthodox kind of anthropological study even by modern standards.

Concluding Remarks

The present generation of anthropologists and social scientists has a lot to learn from the works of this great anthropologist regarding methodological rigour and the applied aspects of their discipline. It is high time that Department of Anthropology at the Calcutta University should take initiatives to collect and republish the writings of T.C. Das which have neither been reprinted by the Calcutta University nor are his books available at the sales counter of one of the oldest universities of India.

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