

Rashtriya Ekta Diwas



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Report

Rashtriya Ekta Diwas, commemorating the 139th anniversary of Sardar Vallabh bhai Patel was observed with enthusiasm and fervor by the faculty and students in Department of Anthropology. The day started on the note of a joint pledge taken by students to work for the progress and unity of the nation. Later, in the afternoon, a seminar was held to discuss the future of anthropology in the light of Sardar Patel's ideas of integration and unity.

The seminar was attended by all faculty members and a large number of students, both postgraduate and undergraduate and anchored by Dr. R. P. Mitra. Both faculty members as well as students expressed their ideas on shaping anthropology to work towards harmony and unity.

Prof. V. K. Srivastava, head of the department of Anthropology called for an informal discussion among the attendees contributing their ideas on future of anthropology in light of Patel's contributions. In his introductory address, he shared various inspiring events from Sardar Patel's life. Known as the 'Bismark of India', he had a stoic personality which led him to bear immense physical pain and suffering with a heroic fortitude. Speaking from an anthropologist's perspective, he discussed how studying his life history would reveal exemplary insights on a leader's commitment to humanity and upholding the cultural values. Episodes from his life, like letting his elder brother go for higher studies abroad before himself and not letting even his personal suffering of losing his wife affect his duty confirm to an anthropological commitment of serving humanity. Levi- Strauss, an eminent anthropologist has talked of existence of anthropology till the existence of humanity, where anthropology as a commitment has existed before anthropology as a subject.

The anthropological tilt of Sardar Patel's life was evident from his style of working for harmony and progress of the country. In the true spirit of an anthropologist, he went around Kheda district in Gujarat documenting the problems faced by the people and involving them in shaping the solutions. His work against caste discrimination, alcoholism and minority integration is an inspiration for future anthropologists to understand and contribute to national cohesion.

Invoking Foucault, Prof. Srivastava said that “when we talk about a thing, it becomes a discourse”. So, starting a dialogue on life and works of Sardar Patel will initiate a long standing discourse on socio-cultural and politico-geographical unity of the country. As anthropologists, we stand at a discerning position to understand from his life, what Sunil Khilnani says is “an idea of India”.

In respect of this commitment of anthropology to humanity, he expressed his worries for the future of anthropology as it has largely remained confined as a discipline. Newer sub fields, previously the forte of anthropology have emerged in educational settings which sometimes require a substantial dilution of anthropological perspectives. As anthropology shrinks in its own subject matter, its knowledge is paradoxically being relied upon, in an ever increasing manner, by other fields like economics, development studies, etc. To provide ground based valid models.

Dr. Mitra said that role of anthropology for the future of a united India has never been more relevant than now. With 4635 communities (as compared to just 56 in China), the problems and challenges of such a huge diversity in a fast changing and globalized world require active contribution from anthropology on both social and policy-making levels.

Prof. Subhadra Channa highlighted the paradox in discussing the future of anthropology as future of any other science like botany or physics in never even a question. The fact that culture and humanity

are not going to go away fuels her optimism for a bright future of anthropology. Anthropologists have always tried to understand the concept of nation as imagined or as a construct based on key symbols of politico-geographical aspects. As majority of what concerns anthropology is not seemingly material, like the culture and values of people, anthropologists are better positioned to critically evaluate mainstream notion of a nation from the perspective of margins of the society.

So, future of anthropology lies in trying to understand various ways in which a nation is built through use of cultural and social symbols, like festivals which bring people together under a commonly held idea of nationalism. Partha Chatterjee in her book “symbolism and remnants” discusses some of these symbols that built India as a nation in a manner similar to Anderson's work which explores symbols standing for a unified identity of Europe. Studying this symbolism, which is the strength of anthropology, can be utilized to forge harmony and a renewed sense of unity among all sections of Indian society, including those on peripheries.

Prof. P. C. Joshi discussed the need to understand the concept of integration, its requirement and how anthropologists can contribute to integration that is acceptable to all sections. He asserted that India has, since time immemorial, been a country celebrating richness of diversity and cultural tolerance. India has always extended its warm embrace to different communities, like the Parsis, the Jews and the Tibetans. However, what is truly heartwarming is that India never tried to integrate them into a particular idea of mainstream integration and celebrated the differences in a harmonic co-existence. So, for him, the metaphor of India being a 'melting pot' of cultures is a misnomer as the diverse cultures never fuse into one but co-exist and flourish alongside. India can be more suitably seen as a 'salad bowl' where all communities retain their flavour and combine to give a unique and rich taste. Prof. Channa narrated an incident when she came across a poster made by Jewish community in USA (?) which traced the movement of Jews across the world. It was, as an Indian, proud moment for her to see it written that Jews were persecuted everywhere they went but it was only India, with its culture of tolerance that gave them safe haven.

Prof. Joshi emphasized the need to see Patel as a guiding force to celebrate our differences and achieve a harmonic co-existence rather than as just a symbol of unity. Anthropology, with its guiding principle of cultural relativism offers a pragmatic and inductive approach to reach out for such a harmony. This was also strength of Patel's efforts, where he would reach out to even the last person concerned. The future of anthropology is as bright as the future of India as both are based on ideas of cultural relativism, tolerance and celebration of differences.

Prof. V. K. Rao presented his spectacular findings on cultural and linguistic plurality in India from “People of India” project undertaken during his term as director at Anthropological Survey of India. The findings highlighted the cultural syncretism and community identities across India. The syncretism at the level of religion and languages is beyond imagination with a single community with plurality of religions and linguistic affiliations. Prof. Rao asserted that such a profound pluralism is not the multi culturalism that West now talks of. Rather, the depth of cultural diversity in India, as confirmed by genomic studies, is ancestral, much like the bio-diversity. Hence, a future of anthropology lies in focusing on dynamics of cultures, pluralism and changes.

In the spirit of anthropology, perspectives on integration as a concept from the margins were put forwards by different faculty members.

Dr. Avitoli Zhimo shared the stories of her parents' generation who underwent difficult and miserable period before being integrated to the Union of India. Naga fields were bombed, people forced bondage in 'groupings' and the violence that escalated between army and freedom fighters or the insurgents to

the detriment of Nagas, most of them who are still alive and carry the agony of 'wounds of integration'. She also questioned the idea of celebrating unity when in everyday life she comes across remarks of racism and north-easterners being labeled as “chinki”. She called in for an active role by anthropology to promote awareness and initiate a dialogue among different communities to achieve a peaceful co-existence and harmony in true sense.

Dr. M. Kennedy also discussed how Sardar Patel's visit to Manipur was observed locally as a black day to express agitation against the violence of integration. He called in for understanding of Patel as a national icon and as a symbol of state from the eyes of an oppressed. A true harmony can be achieved only by an active involvement of the margins of the nation into the mainstream for creating a sustainable future of the country. He also advised the department to initiate optional papers on anthropology of public policy or administration for a ground based anthropological involvement with the state.

Mr. Chakraborty Mahajan discussed the ideas of integration in light of his fieldwork in Kashmir. He compared the metaphors of bringing up Patel as a symbol of unity and parallel developments in popular media, like the screening of Haider as dialectics of assertion to forge identities. He called for an anthropological engagement with the idea of nation as perceived by the government at Indian independence as based on that of a nation state in Europe and how a more 'Indian' idea of a nation can be developed.

Dr. Mitashree Srivastava discussed the similarity of anthropological ideas with that of Patel. A rational outlook to the problem at hand, viable short term goals, resourcefulness, etc. were some of the traits of Sardar Patel that are also characteristic of anthropologists. So, she urged the need for anthropologists to take inspiration from legendary figures to create a just unity. Shared victim hood among the communities gives rise to a sense of pseudo-unity which may hinder national harmony. So, a pragmatic approach to problems of integration needs to be taken for a just India.

A number of ideas for reinvigorating the discipline of anthropology and a productive future were put forth by various faculty members and students.

Dr. P. R. Mondal traced the emergence of anthropology as a scientific discipline and its involvement with every aspect of human life. Giving a biological anthropologist's perspective, he asserted that anthropology's association with genomics has to go beyond stones and mounds and engage with emerging challenges in human genomics and associated aspects, both in Indian communities and elsewhere.

Dr. Indrani Chattopadhyaya talked of a future of anthropology from an archaeological perspective where she feels is an increasing need of digitization of the data which could be computed to generate novel artifacts.

Dr. K. S. Saraswathy emphasized a focus on team work in anthropology, particularly genetic and molecular anthropology which is facing a sustained pressure from non anthropologists working in similar fields with better technological sophistication. A better genetic and molecular understanding of populations in India will contribute to a better future for India as well.

Dr. Vipin Gupta highlighted the need of exploring novel research questions by biological anthropologists and relating them to socio-cultural determinants of different populations. By focussing on urgency of research in field of chronic and non communicable diseases in India in a field dominated by clinical sciences, anthropology can bring in diverse perspectives grounded in culture to improve

health scenario of the country. For this, long term scientific resources should be developed by the departments which can be sustainably used by generations of researchers and postgraduate students. The anthropological knowledge has to combine local with global health issues.

Nilisha Vashist, a research scholar, shared experiences from her research on mental health and summed up as few points that can lead to a renewed vigor in anthropology as a discipline. She highlighted the need of a more interdisciplinary stance by anthropologists using relevant knowledge across diverse allied fields for a better outreach and a mote critical perspective challenging the global hegemony by Euro-American constructs of health by bringing up local perspectives not only as measured against established notions but also in a reverse flow of knowledge from global south to global north.

Suniti Yadav, another research scholar, emphasized the need of different sub fields of anthropology- social and physical anthropology, archaeology and linguistics to work in collaboration for betterment of anthropology. Also, the guiding principle of anthropology as a commitment to humanity would ensure a bright future for the subject.

A short visual of Sardar Patel edited by Dr. Avitoli G. Zhimo was screened and the seminar closed on a patriotic fervor with national anthem being played.
