

## Fettered Disciplines: Breaking the Bonds of Coloniality in Anthropology and History

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**Abstract:** This paper is about the rise and consolidation of anthropology as a viable academic discipline as part of larger colonial discourse and its complex and problematic relationships with the disciplines of history and sociology. The underprivileged position of anthropology as a discipline with its workspace being non-industrial, non-western and primitive societies in relation to sociology which reserves its position over western, European and developed societies and its social studies portrays the categorization of academic disciplines by Europeans based on civilization scale and developed/underdeveloped hierarchy. In the attempt of colonial observers to study the native lives, anthropology provided the necessary tools to claim a scientific study of cultures and practices through ostensibly impartial narratives. Their surveys and ethnographic reports led towards establishing a vast repository of data on human practices. Anthropological enquiry attempts to understand the everyday lives of people; history, on the other hand focused on events that marked revolutionary changes in the lives of people. The anthropological turn in history in the form of shift in focus from the revolutionary to the mundane was assisted by the growing stress on interdisciplinary studies across academia.

**Keywords:** Anthropology, History, Colonialism, Hegemony, Decolonization, Imperialism.

### INTRODUCTION

*“To speak pidgin to a Negro makes him angry, because he himself is a pidgin-nigger-talker. But, I will be told, there is no wish, no intention to anger him. I grant this; but it is just this absence of wish, this lack of interest, this indifference, this automatic manner of classifying him, imprisoning him, primitivizing him, decivilizing him, that makes him angry” [1].*

With the professionalization of disciplines by the middle of the twentieth century, the location of primary theoretical analysis shifted into the domain of the university space. A consolidation of academic work under the auspices of an institution meant that the emphasis moved from studying progress of mankind on the basis of an individual’s experience of the world. It was now not merely about marking progress of people and civilizations. Disciplines now focused on questions that would attempt to understand cultures and social formation across the world. A formalization of the disciplinary limits and overlaps, created within the university space as conceived in the Western world, allowed for the expansion of the scope of disciplines as well as consolidated its limits. In this context, with the waning of the control over colonies, Anthropology as a discipline changed form. The attempt here would be to trace this changing form as a reflection of the political,

social, and global impact of imperialism and colonialism across the world.

### Anthropology as a discipline to study the non-westerner

Anthropology as a study had emerged alongside the encounter of the Western world with large parts of hitherto unknown regions in Asia, Africa and Latin America.. From its very inception, anthropology has sought out the exotic “other” and had usually concentrated this search in the colonial possessions of the British Empire, till the period of decolonization and independence [2]. Bronislaw Malinowski, the man responsible for founding the discipline at least methodologically, saw anthropology as being a scientific Endeavour, concerned with the discovery of absolute “facts” about other cultures, which in turn might be of some practical benefit to colonial administrators. He sought to justify the knowledge gained by anthropologists in relation to its use to colonial administrators.

Anthropology has always been deeply embedded in the colonial system and the discipline helped to perpetuate power relationships, built around inequalities between the colonial regime and the indigenous population, by imagining and representing

the latter as “inferior” other [i]. ‘Anthropologists before independence were “apologists for colonialism” and subtle agents of colonial supremacy’ [ii]. The westerners imagined the oriental society so as to belittle it and thus justify both colonial rule and more recently implicit western hegemony [iii]. Thus the anthropologist when studying the imagined other was unable to argue in favor for the subordinate people he studied. This basically marks the “crisis of representation”. The underprivileged position of anthropology as a discipline with its workspace being non-industrial, non-western and primitive societies in relation to sociology which reserves its position over western, European and developed societies and its social studies portrays the categorization of academic disciplines by Europeans based on civilization scale and developed/underdeveloped hierarchy. Sociology as a science of society owes its origins to the French revolution, industrial revolution, and enlightenment or scientific revolution in Europe. All the three watershed events mark the beginning of modernization and made Europe distinct from rest of the world. So basically the concept of anthropology as a discipline concerned with the study of the ‘other’ or ‘exotic’ or primitive is itself based on the power relations between the ruler and the ruled.

Though there have been numerous anthropological studies of modern social change, these have mainly focused upon very general concepts such as- culture-contact, acculturation, social change, modernization, urbanization, westernization, or the folk-urban continuum. Force, suffering, and exploitation tend to disappear in these accounts of structural processes, and the units of study are usually so small that it is hard to see the forest for the trees. These approaches, in the main, have produced factual accounts and limited hypotheses about the impact of industrial cultures on pre-industrial ones in local communities, but have done little to aid understanding of the world distribution of power under imperialism or of its total system of economic relationships. Until recently there has also been, of course, a bias in the types of non-Western social units chosen for study, with primitive communities least touched by modern changes being preferred over the mines, cash-crop plantations, white settlements, bureaucracies, urban concentrations, and nationalist movements that have played such prominent roles in colonial societies [iv].

### Methodological Shifts

With the impetus to expand colonies and establish political and economic control over it, anthropology alongside ethnography were adopted as disciplinary methods that would allow the colonial powers to better understand the conquered lands, assert Western conceptions of modernity, and provide a schematic for further political and social control. In this context, anthropology provided the necessary tools to claim a scientific study of cultures and practices

through ostensibly impartial narratives by colonial observers of native lives. The surveys, ethnographic reports, anthropometry and such efforts at cataloguing and classifying cultures, communities, tribes, linguistic groups, castes, and social distinctions in the Indian subcontinent over the nineteenth till the middle of the twentieth century indicated the disciplines preoccupation with establishing a vast repository of data on human practices. This ideologically positivist impulse was not static and gradually experienced changes in methodology from within. In an effort at breaking with this positivist reading, Clifford Geertz intervened to attempt to read cultures as texts [3, v]. Moving towards developing methods of interpreting the data collected by anthropologists and ethnographers through field work in distant parts of the world, Geertz raised a red flag on the impact of the observer on the ethnographic context. Here, interpretation of the cultures went beyond the material life of the ethnographic subject. The attempt now was to understand the constructed cultural and symbolic meanings attached to the material life of the subject as part of cognitive anthropology. Geertz valued the experience of the ethnographer as worthy of interpretation alongside that of the natives under investigation. Here the agency of the native in responding to the observing anthropologists was acknowledged as the anthropologist strains to peel layer after layer of experiences to understand the *true* nature of the native subject. But most importantly, Geertz valued the rootedness of experience that shapes multiple interpretations, the various participants in the form of the natives and the anthropologists.

This emphasis on experience marks both overlaps and distinctions between the disciplines of history and anthropology. Anthropological enquiry attempts to understand the everyday lives of people; history focused on events that marked revolutionary changes in the lives of people. The anthropological turn in history in the form of shift in focus from the revolutionary to the mundane was assisted by the growing stress on interdisciplinary studies across academia. Overlapping concerns across disciplines were now addressed through specialization in study made possible by comparative study of cultural aspects like that of memory, emotion, faith, everyday practice, routine, to establish theoretical and methodological generalizations on the lived experience of disparate people rather than grand theories on political, economic and social formation at the level of abstractions in the form of state or religion. With the study of the everyday, social and cultural structures were now understood through tracing patterns of symbolic constructions [4] visible in practices and expressions of power, by the state, society, or religious institutions.

### Questioning the Eurocentric gaze

These patterns are culturally contingent, and yet, cultural influences are also spatially contingent.

Arjun Appadurai brings forth the significance of context most clearly as he locates culture in discourse as a reflection of the emphasis on *space* over the constructedness of the *place* [5]. Questioning the assumed distance of the anthropologist as an observer going elsewhere to assess cultural phenomenon, Appadurai forcefully questions the Western tradition of 'area studies' and the forced alienation of the anthropologist when studying 'other cultures'. Locating the culture of the investigator as the presumed 'cultural metropolis', it is argued that the way we view the world is shaped by how we centre ourselves within it, where the small cultures explain the assumed complexities of the large. Certain conceptualizations essentialize the place under investigation while claiming to move away from Western theoretical generalizations of social formation. We see this clearly for the Indian subcontinent in the ways spirituality, the system of caste, the immutability of tradition, in stasis, as perceived by Western scholarship. With interdisciplinary studies, these conceptualizations find favour within historical understanding of cultures and societies where the present is assumed as a reflection of a cultural complex of a humbler past. This forces us to look at questions of this imposed narrative of linearity of progression implicit in discourse that speaks of complex cultures. These affect the ways sources are utilized. The production of material and ideational features within a culture can be seen and valued differently keeping in mind the location of the observer.

Another aspect to be considered is the location of the producer of knowledge, the social and political context of production and its impact on the narratives of the past and the present. Marcus and Fisher highlight the changing form of disciplines in an era of "postconditions" [6]. Tracing the growth of interpretive anthropology, the emphasis is on the breaking of rigid conceptions, typologies, and the theories that claim to provide holistic pictures. The move away from a centre assumed as the *whole* towards disparate, dispersed perspectives of the conceptual 'other' becomes the central concern within academia. With the forceful intervention by Edward Said that brought out the blind spots within Western academic discourse, the theoretical and conceptual 'othering' of the non-West exposed the inadequacies of existing conceptualization. The inherited colonial prejudices of the Western gaze continued to find expression within anthropological, ethnographic and historical studies. A corrective required a dramatic reconstruction of meaning and representation when understanding cultural systems and symbols. This resulted in a period of introspection within the discipline of anthropology, especially in North America, as part of the emerging effort towards cultural criticism.

At this stage, there emerged an intervention that attempted to address the inadequacies of anthropology and history by remaining conscious of the

concerns of both disciplines in terms of context, of space, in time, in cultural constructions, in perspective, in utilization of sources, and in methodology. The anthropological turn in history was an attempt to break free from the biases of the imperial heritage of both the disciplines by shedding its conceptual constructions. Within the discipline of history in the Indian subcontinent, the Marxist school and later Subaltern Studies attempted a corrective in methodology and perspective. It is here that we are reminded of embedded coloniality of the disciplines [7]. The implicit intellectual hierarchy within the discipline that draws from the theoretical heritage of the spatially and ideationally distinct West even while remaining empirically embedded in the post-colonies is reflected across the academic domain. Providing a theoretical critique of the discipline of history as part of systems of knowledge production within the third world, Chakrabarty traces the dominance of "Europe" in literature, conceptions, theory, and interpretation. The values of 'civilization' and 'progress' are informed by *modernity* as emerging from Europe. He argues that the continued inadequacy perceived within the scholarship emerging from the subcontinent and the effort to 'fill the lacunae' can be seen as efforts to parallel traditions of knowledge of the dominant West. There is a need to understand the silenced traditions of knowledge of the post-colonies and the context from within which it emerges independent of competing Western traditions. Thus, the effort is not to polarize the West from the non-West or the modernized from those that remain outside of Western conceptions of modernity. Rather, he claims that, "I ask for a history that deliberately makes visible, within the very structure of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategies and practices, the part it plays in collusion with the narratives of citizenships in assimilating to the projects of the modern state all other possibilities of human solidarity. This is a history that will attempt the impossible: to look toward its own death by tracing that which resists and escapes the best human effort at translation across cultural and other semiotic systems, so that the world may once again be imagined as radically "heterogenous" [7]. Thus, modernity becomes a contested domain.

It is at this time that the value of alternative narratives allows for alternative imaginings of the past through the present. The impact of political processes, structures of power, and dominant narratives, affect the scope for imagining alternatives, from the stage of production of knowledge to its establishment as the norm. Anthropology as a discipline emerged at a time of expanding colonies, assertive modernity, overt expressions of racism, and a fractured political world. In order to break the shackles of coloniality, the discipline of anthropology has had to come to terms with the parallel emergence of the discipline of history as a means of expressing power through shaping forms of knowledge. It is here, that one is forced to contend

with the structures of power as, “History is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots” [8].

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<sup>i</sup>Asad, T (ed.) (1973) *Anthropology and the colonial encounter*, Humanities Press, New York.

<sup>ii</sup>Ibid 15

<sup>iii</sup>Said, A (1978) *Orientalism*, Pantheon Books, New York.

<sup>iv</sup>Gough, Kathleen (1968) Anthropology and Imperialism, *Monthly Review*, p 19.

<sup>v</sup>The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong.” Geertz, Clifford, ‘Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight’, in *the Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, 1973, p. 452.