

Review of: "Social-Cultural Anthropology in the Oldest Department of Anthropology in India: Writing History or the Suppression of Records?"

Kamei Samson¹

¹ The Govind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institute

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

The critique offered by Abhijit Guha regarding Partha Chatterjee's lecture titled 'Science or Cultural Interpretation: Anthropology at the University of Calcutta, 1920-1970' provides a valuable and thought-provoking perspective. The text demonstrates a sophisticated and knowledgeable critique of an academic discussion by a learned scholar. The task of critiquing the work of an erudite is not easy, even for another erudite. I perceive Chatterjee's lecture not merely as a lecture but rather as a revitalization of a discourse within the field of anthropology, with broader implications for the social sciences as a whole. This phenomenon can be attributed to the fact that the field of social sciences in India has evolved during two distinct intellectual epochs, namely the colonial and the post-colonial. This scholarly exploration spans two significant intellectual epochs, the first characterised by extensive surveillance and oppressive practices, and the latter characterised by the nascent stages of anthropology and sociology. Chatterjee's assessment of social anthropology in India can be regarded as somewhat dismissive, whereas Guha's response can be seen as resolute, considering the colonial origin of social anthropology in India and Chatterjee's reputation. Nevertheless, Guha expressed a resolute stance in his methodological discourse by highlighting Chatterjee's inability to circumvent the abstract of his argument, despite its dissemination via the social media platform Twitter. Given Chatterjee's distinguished academic background, it is unlikely that he overlooked the studies on social anthropology within the Indian setting during the colonial period. The critique presented by Guha regarding Chatterjee's lecture has the potential to be further expanded upon in terms of its ideological dimension. Is it possible to question Chatterjee's esteemed stance on subaltern studies? Why did he fail to consider the emergence of social anthropology, which shares similarities with subaltern studies, within the larger field of anthropology? It is worth noting that throughout the colonial period, anthropology was primarily focused on physical anthropology and influenced by the colonial enterprise driven by racist ideologies. Chatterjee's adoption of anthropology, a discipline to which he was not naturally inclined, could have been characterised by kindness. Utilising his expertise in the field of political science, he adeptly navigated the realm of subaltern studies, ultimately attaining esteemed positions within many fields of the social sciences. Asking Chatterjee to engage with scholarly literature on social anthropology, properly acknowledge its contributions, and reconsider his evaluation of the field would have been a somewhat inconsiderate proposition. Due to these reasons, it can be asserted that Guha has exhibited considerable kindness in his evaluation of Chatterjee's lecture. It is imperative to engage with the ideological aspect of Chatterjee's lecture rather than critique the absent content.

