

Journal of Adivasi and Indigenous Studies (JAIS)
(A bi-annual peer-reviewed online journal posted on Academia.edu)
Vol. IX, No. 2, August 2019: 33-34
© 2019 JAIS, ISSN (online) 2394-5524

Book Review

Behera, Maguni Charan. ed. 2019. *Shifting Perspectives in Tribal Studies. From an Anthropological Approach to Interdisciplinarity and Consilience*. Springer Nature, Singapore Pvt Ltd: Singapore, xxvi + 376 pp.

The book is about the study of tribes in India and how it has branched out over time from anthropology to other disciplines, beyond the divide of humanities and the natural sciences. The author, Maguni Charan Behera, argues that there are multiple methodologies and approaches derived from different disciplines that characterise the specialised field of tribal studies. But these shifts, according to the author, are not reflected in the graduate, post graduate and research programmes offered as a part of tribal studies. There is apparently a disciplinary bias in favour of anthropology, and also ignorance among anthropologists about experts from other disciplines who work on tribes. The author claims that tribal studies continues to espouse dated perspectives and has not proactively engaged with important contemporary challenges facing tribes. Behera associates this apathy within tribal studies to major shifts within anthropology, both in terms of its subject matter and politics. For one, anthropology is no longer restricted to the study of tribes, but extends its inquiry to multiple institutional and social settings such as hospitals, schools and even urban slums. Secondly, anthropology has over time conceded space to other political actors/groups who work closely with tribal communities. In this context, the author calls for the recognition and institutionalisation of interdisciplinarity and consilience in the specialised field of tribal studies. Oddly, the author makes no reference to the important discussion on ‘transversality’ and ‘comparativism’ by Oliver De-Sardan (2005), who also draws on Auge’s work (1986), that rebels against this tendency of overspecialisation within anthropology to emphasise its inimitable quality of indivisibility.

Interdisciplinarity, according to the author, is a graded concept, displaying different levels of ‘conscientiousness’, complexity and application in the field of tribal studies. The papers in the volume are supposed to reflect this idea of gradation—from an embryonic synthesis, which represents a nascent stage of interdisciplinary influences, to a borderline synthesis that creates an analytical subfield at the interface of disciplines. The book is structured along these lines, and is divided into six parts—indigenous dilemma; inter-community space; contextual analysis (case-based studies); space of convergence; embryonic synthesis; and borderline interdisciplinarity. The author’s broad-spectrum prescription for interdisciplinarity represented through a rather incongruous collection of papers fails to achieve the synthesis, notably consilience, that he espouses for tribal studies. Regardless, the book is a valuable resource for research scholars, as it covers a wide range of themes of contemporary relevance in the study of tribes.

Behera claims that despite being in the subject domain of anthropology, the chapters in the book interface with one or more disciplines. He presents Skoda’s paper on inter-community relations in Odisha during the Dasara ritual as a case of historical anthropology, and the two papers by K. Anuradha and Dash, and Meher on the broad theme of insurgency and counter-insurgency as those bordering political science and anthropology. Also, papers by Tripathy on non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and livelihood; Narayan and Chakraborty on education of scheduled tribes in Jharkhand; Pramanik on digitisation of

traditional knowledge systems; Behera on land, property rights and management issues in Jharkhand; and Pandey on mining, relate to specialised fields and open up spaces for convergence across disciplines such as education, and development. Similarly, the part on embryonic synthesis, with two papers on epidemiology of blood pressure among tribes in Odisha by Satapathy, Patra and Mohapatra, and on mother care among tribal women in Simlipal forests in eastern India by Mukhopadhyay and Ray present, for the author, examples of interdisciplinarity of an incipient nature. These papers are set well within their disciplinary limits, indicating only intermittent evidences of anthropological awareness.

Borderline interdisciplinarity refers to interdisciplinarity within the confines of anthropology. Papers on local knowledge in managing upland agriculture by the Adis in Arunachal Pradesh by Samal, Mill and Dollo, and on tribal philosophy and world view by Arina, challenge normative anthropological inquiry through the study of indigenous philosophies and epistemologies. The part on indigenous dilemma presents an interesting discussion of the changing cultural and political landscapes among tribes and its influence on the conceptual core of anthropology. Barnard in his paper on culture and indigeneity demonstrates how the concept of culture has evolved and is now shaped by movements for self-determination, indigeneity and politics of difference among tribes. Likewise, Dangmei's paper highlights how questions of tribal identity and culture are deeply entangled in the politics of religion in north-eastern India. Gupta and Padel's paper on indigenous knowledge and tribal education reveals how modern education is undermining indigenous knowledge and destroying tribal life worlds. These papers explicate the externalities that are continually altering the scope and application of anthropology.

Even if one appreciates the argument of synergising the advances made in the study of tribes in various disciplines, as well as reconciling the political demands that changing contexts of their lives make on anthropology, Behera's uncritical acceptance of other disciplines' engagement with tribal studies is problematic. The author does not delve on the epistemological challenge from within anthropology to the colonial and regressive articulation of the tribal question, and whether the same is reflected in the study of tribes in other disciplines. How reflexive have other disciplines been to re-examine their politics in the study of tribes? How representative and inclusive have they been in accommodating disparate voices from among tribes in their analyses? Has the proliferation of researches challenged existing hierarchies between disciplines? Has greater synthesis between disciplines decolonised and reframed the field of tribal studies? These questions could have been explored further by the author, specifically to elaborate on the concept of consilience in the context of tribal studies and its epistemological and political ramifications in the study of tribes and their contemporary contexts.

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