

## SPECIAL SECTION: ANTHROPOLOGY

### People of India: the profile of a national project (1985–92)

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*The publication of the material under the People of India project was planned in two parts which are inter-related. The data generated have been strengthened by the addition of information from census and other secondary sources.*

THE Anthropological Survey of India (An.S.I.), established in December 1945, is devoted to the bio-cultural study of the people of India. There have been shifts in emphases on research from time to time. At first the focus was on the study of tribal communities, exploring remote areas of the country, and on building up a multi-disciplinary team both in human biology and cultural anthropology to conduct micro-level studies. From 1960 onwards all India Surveys were undertaken on material culture and distribution of traits and on anthropometry. In the mid-seventies national projects were resumed which include All India Linguistic Survey launched to identify distribution of linguistic traits, all India bio-anthropological survey, and three surveys on tribal movements, tribal economy and tribal customary laws. In fact the infrastructure of the An.S.I. with its regional centres located at 8 points is designed in such a way that it is possible to conduct all India surveys together with regional studies on any subject of bio-cultural interest.

The An.S.I. launched the project on People of India on 2 October 1985. There exists a large information gap about a very large number of communities of India, and/or the information that exists on them is scanty and needs to be updated. The objective of the project therefore was to generate a brief, descriptive anthro-

pological profile of all communities of India, the impact of change and development process on them and the linkages that bring them together. It was to be a full profile of the people in an anthropological sense which combined cultural, biological and linguistic dimensions. While we generated first hand information based on what some scholars chose to describe as the first survey of human surface of India—the entire human surface—we also drew upon the surveys conducted in our organization on earlier occasions which have remained unreported. In this sense our survey was only a continuation of what had been done in this organization in the past. It also represents the culmination of the research process and the ethnographic surveys, which had been initiated and continued rather sporadically so far.

Unlike the surveys in the colonial period which covered British India and a few princely states, this project covers the whole country bringing within its ambit such parts of the country that had not been ethnographically surveyed earlier or where the survey was treated as a unit of our study. It started with the investigation of the least-known communities and then moved on to the field study of the lesser-known communities and then on to the field study of the better-known ones. Ample cooperation was extended particularly by the welfare and backward classes departments of the state governments, local officers of Census of India, tribal research institutes, university departments of anthropology, other departments of local universities,

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The policy resolution for the An SI is amended from time to time to redefine its goals in terms of the changing priorities in the national plans. For instance, the policy resolution of 1970 was revised in 1985 when this national organization was explicitly committed to the survey of the human surface of India. The goals were spelt out as follows:

- To continue its original commitments to uninterrupted researches and surveys in social, cultural and physical anthropology throughout the country
- to pursue specially the study of the biological and cultural evaluation of man with special reference to India
- to take up the anthropological study of all people of India
- to continue with the studies of the Scheduled Tribes and other weaker sections
- to lay special emphasis on the applied aspects of anthropological research which have contemporary relevance and national significance
- to reflect in its research programmes the priorities set by the Government of India in regard to

conservation of environment and man's interaction with it, welfare of women and children, mother and child care, development of weaker sections, physical fitness and nutritional status, poverty alleviation, etc

- to take steps to salvage and preserve cultural artefacts faced with the thread of extinction and those which even otherwise need to be preserved
- to work in close collaboration with the state governments, university departments of anthropology, tribal research institutes and other organizations interested in anthropology and allied subjects.
- to function as a clearing house and coordinator at the national level for all agencies in the field of anthropology
- to act as the Anthropological Adviser to the Government of India
- to take steps to disseminate research findings, and
- to study and promote awareness of the rich and composite culture of the country and of the contribution of each community to this heritage.

etc. Local scholars participated enthusiastically in projects and in the discussions at the seminars.

The progress in the investigation and coverage of communities from 2 October 1985 to 31 October 1991 was most impressive. The team was able to identify, locate and study 4635 communities in all states and union territories of India out of 6748 communities listed initially. At an early stage of the project in March 1985 it was decided to transfer the data to computer. This resulted in the development of probably the first software in the country—and one of the first in the world—in ethnography in close collaboration with the National Informatics Centre.

The operations (October 1985–January 1992) were conducted on an enormous scale. The descriptive data are now available in about 120 volumes and 257 diskettes. As many as 500 scholars participated in this project, including 216 from 26 institutions which include university departments of anthropology, tribal research institutes, other research organizations, etc. About 100 workshops and about 100 rounds of discussions were held in all states/union territories in which about 2500 scholars participated. It was a truly participatory project. The investigators spent 26,490 days in the field which works out to six days per community studied in various states and union territories of India. The scholars interviewed a large number of people out of whom there were 26,463 key

informants, which works out to about six informed informants per community (see Annexure 1). Of the informants, about 21% (i.e. 5661) were women. Interviews were conducted in connection with the study of the communities in 4513 villages, mostly multi-community ones, and in 941 towns, spread over 438 districts of India and in 89 cultural regions. On an average, a community was studied at about two places.

The project in retrospect looks almost mindboggling in its scale of operation as it sought to grapple with and tried to understand the complexity of the Indian social situation. The design of the schedule and its pretesting was in itself a feat. The induction of computer technology to generate and store information was another landmark. It has taken almost seven years to complete this project in its present form.

The data of the national and state volumes were presented before the local scholars for their scrutiny at the last round of workshops held from 15 April to 15 May 1991. The last phase of field operations started in June and continued till 30 September. Another line of our activities has been the computerization of the descriptive material contained in the state/union territory volumes. The An.S.I. entered into collaboration with the Centre for Ecological Sciences at the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore for elaborate analysis of its data. A similar line of collaboration was also initiated with the Department of Anthropology, Punjab



University, Chandigarh for the analyses of the biological data collected under the project. The collaboration with the Centre started in July 91, and a number of meetings have been held to work out the guidelines for analyses. It has been a very fruitful collaboration, which has resulted in the preparation of six volumes of quantitative data, which were released.

The publication of the material under the People of India project was planned in two parts which are inter-related. The first consists of the eight volume national series which contains descriptive and quantitative material. The descriptive material contains an abstract on all communities spread across the length and breadth of the country. The data generated in this respect have been strengthened by the addition of information from census and other secondary sources. The eight volumes include two volumes on the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, three volumes on all communities of India and two volumes on the quantitative profile of the people of India, language and biological structure of Indian populations. There is also

the Bio-Cultural Atlas of India based on the data generated under People of India project, All India Bio-Anthropological Survey of India, All India Physiometric Survey, etc. The second part comprises the state/union territory volumes based on a detailed write-up on each community of India, which has been contributed by scholars giving information, among other things, about place of the study of the community. A seventy-volume series will be published by the Oxford University Press and a consortium of publishers over the next four years. The first introductory volume is likely to be published by 15th April 1992. In all, our labours have resulted in an enormous output of the descriptive material, 120 volumes and 42,000 computer sheets containing nearly 20 million words supported by 21,000 photographs and nearly 4146 maps. It has also been a most expensive project in social science in India, the estimated expenditure being approximately rupees seven crores.

The main trends in the analysis of our data could briefly be described. The project has identified, located



*Lambanis, agricultural labourers of Karnataka*



*Onge, hunter gatherers of Andamans*



*Makadlwale, nomadic entertainers of Maharashtra*



and listed 4635 communities in all parts of India. This amounts to the first complete survey -- as complete as any could be -- of the human surface of India. Simultaneously the first definitive list has been prepared of communities in India, which include castes, tribes, minorities, scheduled castes, etc. The study reveals the strength and continuity of regional identities. The communities, no matter how they are ranked, share regional space and ethos. The states were reorganized on the basis of language. An interesting finding of the project has been about the spread of communities across the states. Eighty three per cent of the communities are located within the boundary of state/union territory. This shows that our states/union territories are not only linguistic and cultural but also social categories. For the first time, the communities speaking a particular language have been listed. In all, 325 languages belonging to 12 different language families are returned in the Survey. Apart from the languages, 24 different scripts also have been returned. According to the data collected in situations of culture contact, the incidence of bilingualism has been found to be as high as 65.51% in terms of the number of communities. There are a few communities which do not consider themselves migrants. Every community recalls its migration in its folklore and history. The whole of India is a *kshetra*, and an Indian is a migrant *par excellence*. The immigrants accepted regional ethos. Their role in promoting the development of regional language and literature, and building up economy is well known.

Caste and *jatis* have now become rigid in their 'political' roles, but they have been dynamic entities when seen in the historical context, and in terms of a caste's perception of itself, its role, its relationship with others and with environment. There has been a good deal of occupational mobility and change in spite of continuity. Almost all communities of India have felt the impact of change and development of market and technology.

Our data reinforce the old hypotheses about the rootedness of a community in ecology and its occupation related to resource endowments of a particular region. The link between occupation and resources is attested by a significantly large number of names of the communities associated with occupation and crafts. There are also communities who derive their name from territory and cultural regions.

People identify themselves by all kinds of markers such as dress including shawl and turban, ornaments, body markings, flag and emblem, hair style, colouring of teeth and so on.

The communities have only been partly surveyed for morphological and genetic traits. According to our information, 900 communities have been studied for such parameters. A vast number of them remain

unstudied.

Contrary to the general impression and in spite of higher value attached to vegetarianism, only 9.6% of the communities are pure vegetarian. There is vegetarianism of all shades and nuances practised in response to the value system, compulsions of ecology, availability of food and so on. There are vegetarians who take eggs, fertilized or non-fertilized. Males in a vast number of the communities are non-vegetarian; only in a few communities are women nonvegetarian. Alcoholic drinks are consumed by men in many communities and by women in some of them. Smoking is common. We do see a notable trend of change from vegetarianism to non-vegetarianism but not so from non-vegetarianism to vegetarianism except at the level of individuals.

Yet another important finding of our project is about the diversity of occupations. Colonial ethnography reported the prevalence of a very large number of occupations like bird trapping and so on which was intimately connected with the then state of environment and of exotic occupations like acrobatics, begging, etc. A few of these have either disappeared or continue to be practised on a much smaller scale, as forests and wild life have disappeared with members of such communities having taken to occupations like labour. We have been able to identify 354 occupations on the basis of the data collected. There has been a sharp decline in traditional occupations like hunting and gathering, trapping of birds and animals, shifting cultivation, pastoral activities and priestly functions. There has been a rise in new and modern occupations like horticulture cultivation both settled and terrace, wage labour, animal husbandry, sericulture, business, trade industry, industrial work, service in government and private sectors and so on. Professional groups who depended on the traditional knowledge of astrology, acrobatics, etc. have suffered an erosion of their vocations.

The whole country has become one market, and all communities have access to it directly or through middlemen. There has been a substantial rise in the number of daily wage casual labourers, agricultural, plantation, and even fishing labour. Our data by and large match with those of the census which suggest a rapid rise in the categories of workers as labourers in various fields. In spite of vagaries of census definitions, this trend is fairly well-established. Child labour has been reported from a large number of communities.

There is abundant literature on how communities interact and integrate at the grassroots level. We should not gloss over the processes of integration and interaction of communities at the village level and focus only on conflict and contradictions. As a distinguished anthropologist once said, 'there is more unity in our diversity than we are apt to remember in our moments of forgetfulness'. We have tried to show linkages in two



parts. The first consists of the traditional form of intercommunity linkages, the most important of which is, according to anthropologists and sociologists, through specialization in a particular trade or occupation by which a community becomes integrated with others. We have identified such economic roles of all communities. Then, there are rituals involved in exchange of food of all types. Our data show that the vast majority of the communities are involved in exchange of water and food which has a much wider coverage than is generally believed. Yet another form of old linkages is putative kinship established across communities. There is sharing of wells and water sources, of crematoria and shrines by a very large number of all communities. Almost all communities participate in traditional festivals, and a few of them have a specific role in the festivities. It is interesting to note, as recent studies also suggest, that the local communities have their own perception of their roles, of the significance of the local festivals, and of roles of gods and goddesses and the modes of their propitiation. We need not go at this stage into the economic and exploitative dimensions of the patron-client and other forms of intercommunity relationship and so on.

The picture of India that emerges, in spite of conflicts and contradictions blown up by the media, is also one of sharing of environment and ethos by our communities and their vibrant participation in economic and ritual roles. It is these facts that explain why there has been a continuity and why a sense of harmony prevails over a large part of the countryside in spite of the conflicts that threaten to tear the social fabric apart. That the traditional linkages have been supplemented by modern linkages is brought out in our separate volumes on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, where we have indicated emergence of a large number of teachers, white-collar employees, political leaders and so on. For the country as a whole there are teachers and white-collar employees, entrepreneurs, engineers/doctors, scholars and so on in a large number of communities.

There is an all-pervasive sense of Indianness, often elusive and indefinable but ever-present. To paraphrase Jawaharlal Nehru, Indianness has been a matter of feeling, a dream, a vision, and emotion. In terms of anthropological concepts it represents sharing of ethos and environment, a way of life and a world of rituals, fairs and festivals with their local meanings, of interaction in many other ways.

We are also discussing the possibility of entering into a long-term collaboration with some institutions for the multi-variate analysis of the data generated by or collected under the People of India project. For instance, we propose to undertake an elaborate analysis of our biological data in collaboration with the Department of Anthropology, Punjab University, Chandigarh. We also propose to analyse our data in collaboration

with the Centre for Ecological Sciences, down to the district level and in relation to the ecological, cultural and economic data generated by other sources. As a first step, we have already completed the listing of the communities at the district level by incorporating the district-wise census lists of SC/ST communities, compiling the lists of the communities described in the district gazetteers and those of the communities in census village monographs (which has been computerized by the Centre). A problem in this respect relates to establishing the equivalence of the communities mentioned in the district gazetteer with their present-day counterparts identified under the People of India project. The second step taken in this respect has been to computerize communitywise data generated under the All India Bio-Anthropological Survey. Once this, which is expected to take about three months, is complete, district level data set of the People of India should be ready to be linked with other district level data bases such as land use pattern, agricultural productivity, etc., available with the Centre for Ecological Sciences. Many new insights would emerge through a district level analysis of this combined data set. Several types of analysis are possible with the district level data base and a few important ones are mentioned below: (i) Clustering of traits at the district level, (ii) Districtwise mapping of the traits, (iii) Delineation of eco-cultural zones based on the clustering of traits, (iv) Clustering of communities based on 776 traits.

The An.S.I. will also be making available data collected under various other surveys as also the data likely to be generated under two projects on the Dictionary of Personal Names and Dictionary of Place Names to be undertaken in collaboration with the Place Name Society of India. All this will result in preparing a comprehensive documentation system on the people of India. Once this is done, the information may be updated and enlarged from time to time, according to the requirements of planners and academics.

## Annexure 1

### Status of informants

1. Total number of informants: 26,463 (out of 4425 communities)  
(as per progress report) Male: 20,802 (78.61%)  
Female: 5661 (21.39%)
2. Age
  - a) Number of informants age specified: 23,542 (88.96%)
  - b) Number of informants age not specified: 2921 (11.04%)
3. Educational status
  - a) Number of informants educational status specified: 20,460 (77.32%)
  - b) Number of informants educational status not specified: 6003 (22.68%)



- c) Number of non-literate informants: 6574 (32.13%)\*
- d) Number of literate informants: 13,886 (67.87%)\*
- 4 Social constitutional status
  - a) No. of informants having social constitutional status: 22567 (85.28%)
  - b) No. of informants social constitutional status not specified: 3896 (14.72%)
  - c) No. of SC informants: 3901 (14.74%)
  - d) No. of ST informants: 3592 (13.57%)
- 5. Occupation
  - a) No. of informants, occupation specified: 22481 (84.95%)
  - b) No. of informants occupation not specified: 3982 (15.05%)

- c) No. of informants engaged in agriculture: 5072 (22.56%)
- No. of informants engaged in business: 3120 (13.88%)
- No. of informants engaged in service: 3473 (15.45%)
- No. of informants engaged in labour: 3183 (14.16%)
- No. of informants engaged in students: 743 (3.31%)

\*The percentages refer to the number of informants whose educational status is specified.

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# Exploring cultural diversity of the people of India

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The People of India project of the Anthropological Survey of India has assigned the entire Indian population to 2753 communities distributed over 32 states/union territories. This article explores: (a) number of communities in relation to population size, (b) number of and similarity in the traits exhibited by different sets of communities, (c) clustering of the traits in relation to geography, food habits, subsistence strategy and (d) impact of modernization on the division of labour within the Indian society.

THE Indian subcontinent, with its tremendous range of environmental regimes, supports a large human population that is a fascinating mosaic of varied cultural traits. This cultural diversity is organized in the form of tens of thousands of endogamous caste groups that function as largely closed breeding units. Furthermore, in rural India, social interactions and hence transmission of cultural traits overwhelmingly involve members of an endogamous caste group, with inter-group interactions primarily focusing on economic transactions. Members of an endogamous caste group therefore tend to share cultural traits, so that between-group variation in cultural traits is significantly larger than the within-group variation. India's cultural diversity is therefore best investigated in terms of such endogamous caste groups. Presently, however, this is an impossible task given the very large numbers of groups involved. These endogamous caste groups, however, form a smaller number of culturally homogeneous clusters. These correspond to the 'communities' investi-

gated by the People of India project<sup>1,2</sup>. We then have at our disposal extensive information on 2753 such communities making up 4635 elements when a community population in each state/union territory is counted as a separate element. A yes/no response to 776 individual items of information ranging over identity, ecology, food habits, occupation, kinship patterns, marriage rules, art and music, as well as educational status and impact of development programmes is now available for these 4635 community elements. Undoubtedly this represents information of varying degrees of reliability and value from an ecological, anthropological and developmental perspective. Detailed investigation of this material must therefore be based on careful sifting. But before that begins it is worthwhile enquiring into the broad patterns emerging from this rich set of data; this is what we propose to undertake here.

## How many communities?

A good way to begin is by asking how many different communities occur in a given geographical area. The POI data furnishes this number for the 25 states and 7 union territories with population ranging from 40,000 in Lakshadweep to over 110 million in Uttar Pradesh<sup>3</sup>. In addition, the total number of communities for India as a whole is 2753 (Table 1). The relationship between the number of communities and human population for the states and union territories is described well by the equation (see Figure 1):