

DHIRENDRA NATH MAJUMDAR (1903-1960)

DN Majumdar began his journey in anthropology by getting MA in Anthropology from University of Calcutta in 1924. The same year he made his first trip to Chota Nagpur, where he was initiated into anthropological fieldwork by Veteran ethnographer SC Roy.

In 1933 he went to London to study social anthropology with Professor T.C. Haddon and Physical Anthropology with G.M. Morant. While at London, he also attended Malinowski's seminar at London School of Economics and he was greatly influenced by Functionalist perspective.

Contribution to tribal study

For his fieldwork, he selected a tribe called **the Ho in the Kolhan region of Chotanagpur**. This study became a basis for the study of society by students in the future. His Ph.D. thesis published in book form entitled, **A Tribe in Transition: A Study in Culture Pattern (1937)**. His approach, to the study of human culture, was that of functionalists. The approach could be shortened to **MARC**, or Man, Area, Resource and Cooperation. The relationship between these four elements guided the existence of any society. **Man** here refers to human beings having certain biological needs and physical properties. **Area** refers to the spaces which they occupy, the geographical referent which forms the basis of their existence. **Resource** signifies the materials available in the spaces that they occupy. Finally, **Cooperation** indicates the relationships between the human beings studied. Harmony in all these four elements leads to a functional unity in society.

This unity breaks down due to external pressures. Using this model Majumdar claimed that the Hos were being influenced due to external pressures. He saw **that primitive tribes were declining** and this was for him a primary concern for anthropologists. An advanced culture impinging on a simple and passive society, according to him, caused such a decline. He did not agree that this could be stopped by creating reserves for tribals so that they may not be influenced, or by including them very closely within the Hindu fold as a backward form of Hinduism, but that they should be integrated into Indian society, a form that he called **"creative or generative adaptation."** He believed that dominant groups should give respect to those communities that were backward or downtrodden. A social change, in his opinion, should not be disruptive but should be in continuity with existing cultural traditions. Thus, his work was on culture contact and acculturation among the Ho. His Ph.D. was awarded in 1935. During this period, he was invited to deliver a course of lectures at Cambridge and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland in 1936.

He also highlighted the **Indian parallel of Animatism/Manism named Bongaism** among Ho.

His another book, **The Fortunes of Primitive Tribes (1944)** deals with ethnographic essays on various tribes of UP. His contributions in the field of cultural anthropology consisted of ethnographic accounts of the Ho (Bihar), the Khasa, the Korwa, the Tharu and the so called criminal tribes of UP, MP, Gujarat.

He spent 22 summers, nearly 5 years of fieldwork among Khasas studying the economics, kinship and religion etc. He published his data on Khasas in the book *Himalayan Polyandry*, 1962. In the same book he discussed the Community Development Programme in the Jaunsar Bawar (U.P.).

Majumdar contribution to study of caste system and village studies

Village studies in UP got impetus owing to tireless efforts of DN Majumdar. With his strong bias for tribal studies, he turned to undertake the microscopic study of the villages in UP. Along with several papers Majumdar published a full length book on village in UP. His book *Caste and Communication in an Indian Village*, was published in 1958 which was based on field work in Mohana village near Lucknow. The fieldwork was conducted with a purpose to analyse the process of culture change

especially those induced by development programmes. Majumdar made a holistic study of Mohana village which had a population of 603 in March 1955 distributed into 15 cases. On the basis of an intensive study, the short range history of the village, the inter-caste relationship, the religious beliefs and practices, the life cycle and other aspects of culture have been carefully described. Majumdar considers Village “as a concept, a way of life”. **An Indian village is a concept because it is a constellation of values which change slowly so that village retains its identity. It is a way of life because the people still live more or less as they did before.” Majumdar considered the village and town as two distinct constellation of values.**

Majumdar makes an elaborate study of **inter-caste relationships and the process of caste mobility. He describes the processes of fusion and fission which have produced innumerable social groups.** He also gives evidences to support that the caste mobility has been both vertical and horizontal. **He also claims that Indian village is not a self-contained unity, it is integrated at different levels with total social system of the country.**

The next book **Chor ka Ek Gaon**, is based on the research at Village Chittora in Mirzapur district undertaken in 1955 under the Cornell-Lucknow research project. Chittora, a mixed village of tribals and non tribals had a population of 830 including 342 tribals with 12 castes and 5 tribal communities of Manjhi, Kherwar, Chero, Panikar, Bhuiya. The book presents a descriptive account of village and expresses a deep concern about the processes of acculturation that are operating in the village. This book is of special significance because it reflects Majumdar’s attempt to study a village type in which tribals reside with Hindu castes, and who have got detribalised and Hinduised. Secondly, this village is characterised by the **conspicuous absence of any dominant** caste unlike most village studied by the anthropologists.

Contribution to Physical Anthropology

Majumdar conducted an extensive anthropometric and serological surveys in UP, Bengal and Gujarat. He also collected similar data among Ho of Singhbhum and Gond of Bastar.

On the basis of serological studies, he demonstrated the genetic relationship of the population of UP with those of Bengal in East and Punjab in West. In UP itself, he showed that the caste hierarchy has a biometric basis. The castes which constitute clusters, being close to each other in hierarchical organisation, were shown to be also within a close range of biometric variation. **Majumdar supported the Risley’ idea of racial origin of Caste system.**

In his book, **Races and culture of India**, he defined race as a group of people who by their possession of number of common physical traits can be distinguished from others, even if the numbers of this biological groups are widely scattered, they form a race.

Majumdar did not confine his attention to distribution studies of racial characters, he was also interested in Ontogenic development of Indian children. His study of school children in Lucknow is an important landmark in physical anthropology in India.

At the time of his death, he was the supervisor of a research project on a cross-cultural study of growth among children in UP. Data on 30000 cases had already been obtained. He was keen on determining purely physical as well as cultural determinants of growth.

At the time of his death he was also engaged in a study of ABO and Rh blood group among the criminal tribes of UP.