

# Scrutinising the Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption

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Nirmal Kumar Bose's idea of the Hindu method of tribal absorption, which is still regarded as an established anthropological theory, stands on weak methodological foundations and insufficient field data. Bose's theory not only served the ideology of the privileged class, but also foreclosed the growth of an indigenous, nationalist, and secular Indian anthropology. Ironically, more empirically sound and materialist field findings of anthropologist Tarak Chandra Das, who was a contemporary of Bose, were marginalised in the discipline.

Any consideration in the contemporary context, of the traditional Hindu method of tribal absorption is therefore, sheer madness to my mind. In the present context this is simply anachronistic.

— Niharranjan Ray (1972: 23)

Famous Indian anthropologist and one-time personal secretary of M K Gandhi, Nirmal Kumar Bose (1901–72) proposed a theory in anthropology which is known as the “Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption.” The idea was first proposed in a paper in the Indian Science Congress in 1941. Bose's proposal was based on his short field trips among the Juang tribal community of the Pal Lahara region, now in Odisha.

The essence of the theory was that tribals who had come into contact with their powerful caste Hindu neighbours gradually lost their own tribal identity and were given a low-caste status within the Hindu fold. This idea became popular and acceptable among mainstream Indian anthropologists and Bose's paper turned into a compulsory text in the curriculum of Indian anthropology. There was hardly any question or restudy in the Juang area to recheck Bose's proposition, and the idea took deep root in the minds of Indian anthropologists for generations. The university and college students of India who studied anthropology were taught the theory of the Hindu method of tribal absorption as an established sociological fact.

Hinduisation of the tribals was accepted as an obvious and inevitable process which also helped overlook any possibility of protest by the tribals against Brahminical imposition in any form. It also helped hide the exploitation and subjugation of the tribals by the Hindus. Later, another theory proposed by M N Srinivas, one of the doyens of Indian sociology and social anthropology, reinforced the superiority of the Brahmins by showing that the lower castes always tried to imitate and emulate the lifestyle and ritual practices of the twice-born castes. This theory came to be known as “Sanskritisation” and also became an essential part of the college and university curriculum in Indian anthropology and sociology. A lone Indian sociologist Surendra Munshi (1979: 304) criticised, in unequivocal terms, both Bose and Srinivas in his brilliant article “Tribal Absorption and Sanskritisation in Hindu Society” published in the prestigious journal *Contributions to Indian Sociology*:

My more serious criticism against Bose and Srinivas is that, lacking a general sociological theory of society and social change within the framework of which empirical data are to be collected, interpreted and transcended, they end up with the transformation of the object of study into a theory that has conditioned the study itself. In other words, in their concern with the ideal sphere, they are compelled to accept the ruling ideas of the society, past and present, for providing them with the interpretation of the corresponding empirical reality studied by them. In sum, their analysis is ideological.

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Munshi, however did not deal with the inconsistencies and lack of fit between the data collected by Bose and the theoretical generalisations made by him in his Hindu method of tribal absorption paper.

Since the publication of the twin ideas, Indian anthropology and sociology revolved around the Hindu method of tribal absorption and “Sanskritisation” and under the strong influence of Bose and Srinivas, anthropology and sociology in India became oriented towards the study of Hindu religious and higher caste superiority. The path set by the doyens left little scope for a secular and materialist Indian anthropology.<sup>1</sup> The search for the counter movements against Hinduisation and ethnographies of anti-acculturative processes in Indian anthropology and sociology was marginalised to a large extent. In an article published in *Economic & Political Weekly*, sociologist Vivek Kumar described how the Hindu higher caste domination in Indian sociology produced a partial picture of rural India epitomised in the theory of Sanskritisation propounded by M N Srinivas (Kumar 2016: 33–39). Kumar, however, did not explore a similar scenario in Indian anthropology generated by Bose’s aforementioned theory.

The Western scholars who came to India in the post-independence period too mainly studied caste- and village-level dynamics as well as Indian civilisation under the framework of a high-caste Hindu order, which again added force to the models generated by Bose and Srinivas. The growth of a secular and national anthropology in India was nipped in the bud.<sup>2</sup> Indian anthropology became Hinduised, religious and at the same time Westernised. Indian anthropologists forgot that the development of a national anthropology also required a secular and indigenous approach to the problems of nation building.

### Bose and Das on Tribal–Hindu Interaction

Let me now turn my attention to Tarak Chandra Das (1898–1964), another pioneering anthropologist of India who was a contemporary of Bose. Das’s view on Indian anthropology and the tribal society was completely different to that of Bose and Srinivas, and ironically, despite being an excellent fieldworker and ethnographer, his contrarian ideas did not receive due attention even from his famous students, like Surajit Sinha, B K Roy Burman, and André Béteille.<sup>3</sup>

Das completed a Master’s from the University of Calcutta in Ancient Indian History and Culture and joined the then newly founded Department of Anthropology at the University of Calcutta in 1921 as a research scholar, then he became a lecturer in 1923 and finally, retired as a Reader from the department in 1963. Das conducted intensive fieldworks in Chota Nagpur in the then Bihar (presently Jharkhand state) and in Assam. In 1941, Das delivered the presidential address in the anthropology section of the Indian Science Congress. The lecture was a 28-page full-length paper entitled “Cultural Anthropology in the Service of the Individual and the Nation,” which was neither republished by Calcutta University nor recommended in the syllabus and model curriculum in anthropology recommended by the University Grants Commission. This paper can be regarded as one of the pioneering articles on applied anthropology in India. In this lecture, Das’s major objective was to convince his readers about the immense

potential of social–cultural anthropology as applied science for the overall development of the Indian population. In the five subsections of the lecture, Das dealt with the application of anthropology in almost all the important secular sectors of a modern nation, namely trade, industry, agriculture, legislation, education, social service and administration. One of the most vital sections in Das’s presidential address was on the role of anthropologists in building a proper type of educational system suitable for the real needs of a particular community in the Indian context. Das had the courage to write strong words regarding the colossal wastage of public money by the then colonial government for the establishment of schools among the tribal people. Interestingly, Bose’s paper, “The Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption” was presented by him in the same Science Congress on 3 January 1941 in which Das delivered the presidential address. Bose’s lecture was later reprinted in the journal *Science and Culture* on 8 October 1941 and finally incorporated in his book *Cultural Anthropology and Other Essays* (1953). In the course of time this paper became compulsory reading in the teaching of Indian anthropology, while Das’s lecture that dealt with the role of anthropology in solving the burning and practical problems of nation building went largely unnoticed by anthropologists.

A celebrated admirer of Bose’s theory was Béteille who, in one of his important papers “The Concept of Tribe with Special Reference to India” published in *European Journal of Sociology* in 1986, supported and praised Bose’s idea without making any close examination of the Juang data collected by Bose in 1928 and then selectively explicated in the 1941 paper. Béteille, however, issued a cautionary remark before presenting his views on Bose:

I must repeat before presenting Bose’s argument that there are over 400 named tribes in India whose conditions vary so much that it would be naive to expect the argument to apply equally well in all cases. (Béteille 1986: 313)

Just after the above remark Béteille (1986: 314) proceeded to praise Bose quite uncritically:

Bose took pains to describe the economic context of the symbiosis between tribes and the wider society, arguing that the absorption of the former by the latter was generally of some material advantage to both, though not in the same way or to the same extent. He believed that the caste-based economy of the wider society was superior in the sense that its technology and its division of labour enabled it to support populations of greater size and density than in a tribal economy whose material base was at a lower level. When that material base became precarious due to expansion of population or for some other reason, a tribe or a section of it sought economic security through closer attachment to the wider society. This attachment was generally granted by the wider society on the condition that the newly-attached group took the lowest position in it. Bose combined fieldwork in the tribal areas with a study of the classical texts to establish his argument.

Throughout the paragraph, Béteille’s use of the word “believe” is significant. Was it Bose’s belief only or a truth believed by Béteille himself? Béteille’s uncritical approach was apparent when he stated that Bose combined fieldwork with classical texts to establish his argument. Béteille did not care to describe the kind of fieldwork and the data gathered by Bose which he combined with classical texts.

Another admirer of Bose was L K Mahapatra of Utkal University. But he too in the second part of his Bose Memorial Lecture delivered in 2006 described in detail a process of “de-Hinduisation” which was in motion in large parts of Odisha among the Santal tribe when they “deliberately withdrew from the process of Hinduization

because of some external and internal forces” (Mahapatra 2006: 23). Not only the Santals. Mahapatra also pointed out that

In a similar movement of *de-Hinduisation* [Mahapatra’s emphasis] the erstwhile scheduled castes in India have often called themselves *Dalit* (oppressed) and have converted themselves to Buddhism, Christianity, Sikhism or to Islam. (Mahapatra 2006: 23)

I will now describe the kind of field data collected by Bose and its inconsistency with his theorisation in the next section of this paper.

### **Bose’s Juang Papers and His Leap towards Theory**

Bose published three papers in 1928, 1929 and 1930 on Juangs in *Man in India*, which were later reprinted in his book *Cultural Anthropology and Other Essays* based on his short fieldwork in Odisha. Bose had to leave the Juang territory by a police order probably because of his connection with the Gandhian freedom movement against the then British government, and for various reasons he did not get any opportunity to conduct prolonged intensive field research among the tribal communities in India (Sinha 1970: 9). Unlike the 1941 paper, all these three articles contained some hard ethnographic data and no theoretical formulation was attempted by Bose. How did Bose formulate theoretical generalisations based on ethnographic data from a short field study that did not support his position? This should have been a matter of research in the history of Indian anthropology. Let us first examine the data collected by Bose and their analyses in his Juang papers.

**Marriage and kinship of the Juangs:** This is Bose’s first paper titled “Marriage and Kinship among the Juangs,” first published in 1928. The foremost aspect of Juang marriage that Bose reported was the practice of a non-Hindu custom, which was the payment of bride-price. The second notable fact reported by Bose is his inference derived from an analysis of the Juang kinship. His inference was that Juangs practised cross-cousin marriage, again a non-higher caste and non-Hindu custom in north and eastern India. Third, Bose reported that widows among the Juangs were not allowed to remarry and divorce was not permitted (Bose 1953: 136–46). He however, did not consider these customs as being caused by the influence of higher caste Hindus.

**Social organisation of Juangs:** The title of the second paper of Bose is “Juang Associations” first published in 1929. In this paper, Bose observed that the Juangs have sibs, a clan-like kinship-based social formation having totemic names, which unlike the Hindus were trees and animals (Bose 1953: 148–49). Second, Bose found tribal youth dormitories among the Juangs in which the young and unmarried boys and girls passed their time and the boys were found to engage themselves in some gainful economic activities, like basket making. Nowhere in the article, have I found reference to the economic attachment of any Juang family within the Hindu caste order.

**Juang ceremony:** The third paper of Bose in the Juang series is “A Juang Ceremony,” which was first published in 1930 in *Man in India*. The methodology of collecting data by Bose was quite interesting. Bose requested a Juang man, who was his instructor

for learning the Juang language to pray to the Juang gods so that Bose might learn the language of the tribe and Bose paid him some money for this purpose. Accordingly, the Juang man performed the ceremony which Bose described in the paper. The description revealed that the Juang man prayed to the goddess of the earth, god of righteousness and a number of deities including the supreme god-heads of the Juang land worshipped by the tribe. The most important part of the ceremony was the eating of the rice balls by the two black cocks which ensured that the offerings were eaten by the deities and then the sacrifice of the cocks, which beyond all doubt was a non-Hindu magical rite found among many other tribes of India. Of all the offerings made to the gods and goddesses, Bose found only one offering which was made to a Hindu goddess Lakshmi and he noted:

It would appear from a perusal of the formulas of worship that *Lakshmi*, one of the Hindu deities, has been incorporated in the Juang pantheon. (Bose 1953: 152–55)

And that was all about Bose’s field data on the Hindu method of tribal absorption found among the Juangs of Orissa in 1928. After 12 years, Bose brought back his Juang field data in the famous paper on the Hindu method of tribal absorption with a fresh vigour, but his exposition in the 1941 paper seemed to lack logical consistency. I will first quote from Bose’s own account and then point out the inconsistencies.

The significant fact is this, that the Juangs had started worshipping a Hindu goddess, although it was done in their own way. The bath in the morning, the offerings of sun-dried rice, the terms *satya*, *devata*, *dharma*, all prove how strongly Juang religious ceremonies have been influenced by those of the neighbouring Brahminical people. In nearly all respects, the Juangs are a tribe living outside the pale of Hinduism. They have their own language, which belongs to the Mundari group. No Brahmin or Vaishnava priest serves them; and they perform their marriage and funeral customs all by themselves. They eat beef and carrion, and are not considered by the Hindus to be one of the Hindu castes. Yet there is clear indication that Hindu religious ideas have penetrated into their culture. The Juang seem to be losing pride in their own culture and are adopting Hindu culture with a certain amount of avidity. (Bose 1953: 157)

Now I enumerate the inconsistencies.

First, the above account of Bose was highly selective because he excluded from his own data depicted in the 1930 paper, all the non-Hindu customs, namely eating of the rice balls by the two black cocks and their subsequent sacrifice and prayers made by the Juangs to their supreme indigenous gods in the 1953 paper.

Second, again in the 1953 paper he reported that the Juangs were not considered by the Hindus to be “one of the Hindu castes.” How then were the Juangs absorbed by the Hindus?

Third, Bose himself admitted that the Juangs maintained their own ethnic identity but he at the same time stated that “the Juang seem to be losing pride in their own culture and are adopting Hindu culture with a certain amount of avidity” which appeared to be contradictory. If the Juangs were worshipping the Hindu goddess “in their own way” and retained their own customs and were not accepted by the caste Hindus to be one of the Hindu castes, then how were Juangs being absorbed in the Hindu order?

Fourth, Bose used his 1928 field data after 12 years in his 1941 Science Congress lecture without any rechecking and/or cross-verification. He also did not update it when the same paper was reprinted after another 12 years in *Cultural Anthropology*

and *Other Essays* (1953). Bose did not care to look into the long article written by none other than Verrier Elwin (1948: 1–146). Elwin's painstaking ethnography in Keonjhar and Pal Lahara did not reveal any picture of Hindu method of tribal absorption. On the contrary, the ethnography revealed in detail the full-fledged custom of beef-eating and all kinds of non-Hindu culinary practices among the Juangs (Elwin 1948: 46–49). It is really a surprising fact in the history of Indian anthropology that sociological interpretation of a 24-year-old insufficient field data got recognition and acceptance in Indian anthropology and sociology as an established theory.

Apart from the above inconsistencies and gaps the Juang ethnography constructed by Bose was superficial as regards the economic pursuits of the tribe. I quote Bose (1953: 157–58):

At one time, the tribe lived by hunting, collecting and *jhum* cultivation on the slopes of the Malyagiri. But the State has now restricted both hunting and the predatory form of cultivation in order to preserve the forests of the land. The Juangs have thus been forced to adopt wet cultivation in the valleys between the hills. They also work in bamboo and sell baskets, wicker-boxes and winnowing fans to the neighbouring people, and with the money earned in this manner they buy cloth and salt or iron and rice when they do not grow the latter. Thus, instead of being economically more or less self-contained, they have now been tagged on to the larger body of Hindu society; they now form only one cog in the wheel of the advanced productive machinery of the Hindus. In the matter of this manufacture of bamboo articles, the Juangs enjoy virtual monopoly in the State of Pal Lahara and no other caste would willingly engage in that manufacture for fear of losing its own social position.

First of all, the description of the economic life of the Juangs by Bose was just a generalised account not supported by any case study or census or other kinds of data. For example, he stated that the Juangs “at one time” practised shifting hill cultivation. But the practice of shifting hill cultivation among the Juangs has been reported by researchers as late as early 1980s. Alexandra E George reported from his first-hand experience in a paper “Tribal Development: A Visit to the Juang” published in the *Economic & Political Weekly*:

The Juang, whose total population was 24,384 according to the 1971 Census, are food gatherers and hunters and traditionally practice shifting cultivation which is still in many villages their primary source of food despite Government pressure to abandon it. The practice permeates their entire social and religious life. (George 1982: 1095)

Second, Bose's observation that the Juangs were forced to adopt wet rice cultivation and used to earn their livelihood by the manufacture of baskets from bamboo when they could not grow rice is dubious. Did they also give up wet rice cultivation and totally became basket-makers to become a basket-making caste within the Hindu fold? Census reports on the occupation of the Juangs however tell a different story. According to the Census 2001 in Orissa, among the Juangs (who are now classified as a primitive tribal group or PTG) 12.8% males were reported as cultivators and 31.4% males were agricultural labourers (Nayak 2010: 203). Combining George's report and the census information one can say that the Juangs were dependent on forest and shifting cultivation and a considerable section of the tribe like many others have turned into agricultural labourers. Juangs were not reported as a community specialised in any handicraft in the census. The Hindu caste society could not provide them the economic security

as envisaged by Bose. This point was succinctly taken up by Roy Burman in his 1983 *Economic & Political Weekly* article:

Bose's model has been questioned on various grounds. It is particularly to be noted that the bulk of the Hinduised tribals are either cultivators or have become landless labourers. Caste hardly provides any protection against competition to those engaged in these occupations. (p 1173)

But as Virginius Xaxa perceptively pointed out, Roy Burman also classified the tribes of India on the basis of their degree of incorporation into the caste Hindu society. He too classified tribes into (i) those incorporated in Hindu society, (ii) those positively oriented to Hindu society, (iii) those negatively oriented and (iv) those indifferent to Hindu society (Xaxa 1999: 1520).

### Three Brilliant Monographs by Das

The three lesser known research monographs by Das were published as “Anthropological Papers” by Calcutta University on the Ho (1927), Kharia (1931) and Bhumij (1931) tribes of Chota Nagpur before the publication of his famous monograph on the Purums. These pre-Purum ethnographies were the results of Das's prolonged fieldwork with the students of Calcutta University in erstwhile Bihar province (now Jharkhand) under the British rule. I will now briefly discuss the relevant findings from these three monographs.

**Bhumij:** The monograph on the Bhumij of eastern India contained a chapter entitled “Crises in the Life of an Individual” under which Das described the Bhumij customs around birth, marriage and death. Throughout the chapter, he not only described the customs of the tribe but also pointed out how the Bhumij maintained its tribal ethnic identity under the overarching influence of Hinduism which made its inroads in the region, particularly after the introduction of better transport and communication ushered in by the British rule. Unlike Bose who laid added emphasis on the Hindu method of tribal absorption, Das was concerned with the ground realities around the sustenance of indigenous cultural identity of the Bhumij who were admittedly undergoing transformation.

Here I take the opportunity of comparing the views of Bose as proposed by him in his article “The Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption” (1953) with that of Das as recorded in his monograph on the Bhumij. Bose's observation on the Juangs of Orissa was conducted at a place not far away from the one where the Bhumij observed by Das lived, and both did fieldworks in their respective places roughly around the same time period, that is, from 1926 to 1928. For Bose, although Juangs were tribes, they were slowly coming under the Hindu fold and were gradually being assigned a low status in the caste system and that was important for Bose to make his generalisation on the absorption of the tribals by the Hindus. Das, in contrast, was more interested to delve deeper into his Bhumij material from an ethnographic and historical perspective, and he had no intention to build up a theory prematurely like Bose. In fact, Bose's ethnographic encounter was brief with the Juangs, and he only highlighted one instance of a Juang ceremony in which he found the worship of a Hindu goddess by the Juangs. Bose was not interested to see whether there was any counter process of resistance to the

adoption of Hindu customs and rituals by the Juangs or any other tribe who came into contact with the dominating Hindus. Just compare this view with that of Das (1931: 8) in his Bhumij book,

[But] the more freedom-loving section of the tribal peoples, who retreated before the oncoming rush of Hindu culture and British domination, and found shelter in the mountain recesses and sal forests, began to set up strong barriers in the form of social taboos for the protection of their own society and culture. We have found instances of this among the Hos inhabiting the interior parts of Kolehān and have referred to it in our monograph on the Hos.

Bose's bias towards Hindu method was so deep in his mind that in his 1953 paper he used T C Das's first paper "High Caste Hindu Marriage in Bengal with Special Reference to Its Folk Elements" written in 1922 as an evidence to prove his hypothesis. Bose (1953: 166–67) stated,

A study of Bengali marriage customs undertaken many years ago by Mr T C Das of the Calcutta University shows clearly how Vedic and non-Vedic customs have both entered into their composition, indicating how the people of Bengal came long ago under the dominance of Brahminical civilisation.

Interestingly, the main objective of Das in the 1922 paper was to show that marriages as a form of social contract (not as an indissoluble sacrament) in which the bridegroom did not enjoy full control over his wife and her property also existed among many lower castes within the Hindu society and many tribes of North East India who did not come under the influence of Hinduism. So, the simultaneous existence of Brahminical (Vedic) and non-Brahminical (non-Vedic) values, ethos and customs in Bengali marriage did not necessarily prove the dominance of the former across the caste spectrum as envisaged by Bose who (mis)interpreted Das's paper to fit it to his own scheme of Brahminical dominance (Guha 2016: 17–20).

**Kharia:** The ethnography on the *The Wild Kharias of Dhalbhum* written by Das was at the other extreme of his Bhumij monograph. This was a case of a hunter–gatherer tribe who were living almost completely outside the influence of Hinduism, a fact which clearly defied the theory of the Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption. This book contained four chapters and unlike the Bhumij monograph it started with "The People and its Habitat" in which Das cautioned his readers by saying that the Kharias, whom he studied, were totally different from those sections of the tribes who were not under the influence of Hinduism or Christianity as described earlier by the British scholar administrator, H H Risely in 1891. Das (1931: 2–3) particularly studied Kharias who lived in the hills of Singbhum near Dhalbhumgarh and Ghatsila under the present state of Jharkhand in eastern India. All through the monograph, Das meticulously described the material life, social organisation and religious rituals of the Kharia without noticing any Hindu manner and custom. In this social anthropological description Das also used anthropometric measurements to trace the racial affinity of the tribe and found their similarities with the Mundas. In the book, Das described the practice of bride-price, widow remarriage, non-vegetarian diet, belief in non-Hindu nature deities, drinking of rice beer, sacrifice of fowls and engagement of priests (*dehuri*) from their own community which clearly marked off the "Wild Kharias" outside the influence of Hinduism.

**Ho:** *The Hos of Seraikella* (1927) was written jointly with Anathnath Chatterjee (who was a medical doctor and taught physical anthropology at Calcutta University) and is quite instructive. In the preface of the book the authors stated

We would like to make it clear that the social life of the Hos inhabiting the State of Seraikella has been changed and modified in many essential particulars by constant contact with the Hindus. The extent of this influence we have not tried to gauge in the following pages, for we believe that all such problems can only be profitably discussed when more materials are available for comparison. (Chatterjee and Das 1927: vii)

This patient approach towards data and methodological rigour was the characteristic feature of the anthropological works of Das. In contrast, Bose was hasty and quick to search for generalisations. Moreover, Bose was simplistic in his formulations. He seemed to love generalisations more than facts and even borrowed analogies from the physical sciences. Let me quote from Bose's own writing:

In the science of Physics, we are told that electricity flows from high potential to low; and in culture also it seems to flow from an economically dominant group to a poorer one when the two are tied together to form a larger productive organisation through some historical accident. (Bose 1953: 158)

Bose's equation was simple. According to him, since Hindus and their caste system were economically superior to tribes like Juangs and the caste system provided a non-competitive, hereditary guild-like group formation which gave some amount of freedom in the sphere of cultural practices, the tribes did not revolt against this system and were gradually absorbed into it.

One of the most illuminating chapters of the book is on "Kinship and Social Organisation." In this chapter Chatterjee and Das reported that the Ho society of Seraikella and Kolhan was divided into two broad divisions according to their social status within the tribe and the hierarchy was related to two geographical areas. The Hos settled in the Kolhan proper (their homeland) claimed superiority to the Hos who used to live near the town of Seraikella and other influential centres of Hindu civilisation and this was admitted by the inferiors. In the words of the authors:

Constant cooperation with the *dikkus* lit. foreigners (apparently the Hindus), both social and economic—for example, dining in the house of a *dikku* or working on hire for him—and consequent imitation of their manners and customs in preference to their own, have branded the Hos of the latter region with the mark of inferiority before their more fortunate brethren who have kept or tried to keep the pristine purity of their customs in their jungle fastnesses. Association with the *dikkus* means irredeemable pollution even for the best of the Hos. (Chatterjee and Das 1927: 40)

Furthermore, the Hos, unlike the Hindus, and instead of being absorbed by the Hindus, practised divorce and the remarriage of their widows and the divorced women by *sanga* form of marriage. More importantly, with the death of her husband a Ho woman's bond with her husband's unilateral kinship group (*kili*) was severed (Chatterjee and Das 1927: 27). The monograph by Chatterjee and Das contained a plethora of evidence as regards the practice of non-Hindu religious rites and rituals practised by the Hos and there was no report of any Ho family who lost their own tribal identity and was given a low-caste status within the Hindu fold.

### Sinha's Avoidance of Bose's Ideas

About three decades later, the eminent Indian anthropologist Surajit Sinha who was a student of both Das and Bose did intensive

fieldwork among the Bhumij in South Manbhum and published his papers based on his PhD thesis at the Northwestern University of Illinois, United States in 1956. In an important paper, "Bhumij-Kshatriya Social Movement in South Manbhum," Sinha (1959) recorded waves of movement among the Bhumij which had a heterogeneous character and could not be put under the broad category of Hindu method of tribal absorption and quite interestingly, Sinha did not quote Bose's 1953 article in his paper. Sinha's characterisation of the Bhumij social movement recognised not only the adoption of higher caste Hindu cultural traits, but also a counter process among the younger generation of the Bhumij, who were more interested to join in a secular movement with other tribes of the region towards their social and educational upliftment. Sinha concluded his paper with a perceptive observation:

The worlds of the Bengali Hindu upper castes, the Biharis, State and Union Governments, various political parties, and the pan-Adibasi movement of the Jharkhand Party still remain substantially external to them. (Sinha 1959: 32)

Sinha's conclusion that at least a section of the Bhumij maintained an ethnic identity supported Das's observation on the tribe made about three decades earlier.

Quite interestingly, Sinha despite his deepest reverence for his teacher Bose, never followed Bose's ideas of Hindu method of tribal absorption in his famous papers: (i) "Tribe-Caste and Tribe-Peasant Continuum in Central India" (1965), and (ii) "The Concept of *Diku* among the Tribes of Chota Nagpur" (1969) published in *Man in India*. Sinha viewed "tribe" and "caste" as two ideal types in a scheme of social evolution in which actual societies could be plotted on a continuum with their independent existence and

without the less complex (the tribe) being absorbed into the more complex (the caste) kind of social organisation (Sinha 1965: 57–83). Sinha also found the independent ethnic identity of the tribe being played at the emic level through the use of distinctive linguistic category, namely *diku* used by the tribes to refer to their Hindu neighbours (Sinha et al 1969: 121–38). Not unsurprisingly, no reference of Bose's famous paper on the Hindu method of tribal absorption was found in Sinha's papers written in 1959, 1965, and by Sinha et al in 1969. Sinha made his final pronouncement on Bose's ideas with a reasonable amount of doubt in his paper entitled "Tribal Solidarity Movements in India: A Review."

There is an underlying assumption in Bose's proposition that, on the whole, this process of slow integration provided the tribe with sufficient economic, social and cultural security as not to generate large-scale rebellion. My own impression is that in spite of this general pattern of harmony the tribals are not without an awareness that they were looked down upon and given a low status. (Sinha 1972: 413)

This was the only sceptical public pronouncement of Sinha on his guru's idea of the Hindu method of tribal absorption.

The dominant discourse in Indian anthropology was saturated with a higher caste Hindu ideology by the idea of the Hindu method of tribal absorption proposed by Bose in the 1940s in such a way that nobody questioned the nature of the data collected by Bose himself, which by any standard stood on methodologically unsound foundations. The then ethnographic discourse generated by Das that recorded the counter processes of de-Hinduisation and maintenance of ethnic identity by the economically and socially subjugated and marginalised tribals, was largely put into oblivion and overlooked by anthropologists in India.

## NOTES

- 1 Bhopendranath Datta's (1880–1961) books *Dialectics of Hindu Ritualism* (1950) and *Studies in Indian Social Polity* (1963) although published much later, can be regarded as pioneering work on Indian society and culture from a Marxist and materialist perspective. Datta presented his research paper on the political condition of colonial India to V I Lenin. In reply to Datta, Lenin requested him to collect data on the peasant organisations in India, which Datta very much appreciated. His contributions have not yet been included in the curriculums of Indian anthropology nor do the critics of Indian anthropology mention Datta's name.
- 2 There were of course notable exceptions like McKim Marriott's (1952: 261–72) study on technological change and problems of overdevelopment in a village in Uttar Pradesh and F G Bailey's (1971: 299–321) excellent paper on the peasant view of bad life in Orissa wherein the authors discussed about the problems of Indian peasantry from a purely secular perspective.
- 3 In a more recent period, Bêteille, however, corrected himself about his lesser-known teacher Tarak Chandra Das. In his autobiographical memoir entitled "Ourselves and Others" published in the *Annual Review of Anthropology*, he recalled his experiences of studying anthropology at the University of Calcutta in the following manner. I quote Bêteille (2013): "Things in the Department of Anthropology were organised on a small scale, and they moved at a slow pace. The teachers were easily accessible to their students. One of those who taught us about society and culture, T C Das, was meticulous and conscientious, and had a vast store of detailed ethnographic knowledge."

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