

The logo for the Anthropology Book Forum, featuring a stylized blue and white circular design on the left side of a dark blue header bar.

Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Ethnography of an Ethnographer: A Post-Colonial History of Caste and Other Issues

Review by Abhik Ghosh

Autobiography of an Archive: A Scholar's Passage to India

by Nicholas B. Dirks

Columbia University Press, 2015

In India, the tradition of colonial and post-colonial studies has often dominated the world of many of the history departments in a number of Universities. However, very few of them have actually teamed up with the work done in anthropology departments. This is what is so refreshing about the work of Nicholas Dirks. Dirks is a historian as well as an anthropologist who has done his major work in the Indian context. It would be difficult to state where the historian lets go and the anthropologist takes over.

In a beautifully written piece as an initial chapter, Dirks begins by writing an ethnography of an archive, somewhat similar to that mentioned in *In An Antique Land* by Amitav Ghosh. However, Dirks pulls in a lot of evidence to show how the archive itself has its own history and therefore the evidence within it is structured, organised and mirrors the collector of the evidence. Through the ethnography of the archive, Dirks displays an archive within the archive. The collection of Colin Mackenzie was collected using a different set of rules. The colonial government began by using history as a mode and justification for ruling over India. It went on to use anthropology as a mode and means for the continuance of their rule. So, Dirks says, “History constructed a glorious past for the nation in which the present was the inevitable teleological frame; anthropology assumed histories that necessitated colonial rule. History told the story of the nation; anthropology explained why a nation had not yet emerged” (40).

Continuing with this line of thought, Dirks goes on to explain how Colin MacKenzie used and

acknowledged the work of native researchers, not only for collection but also for their ideas in analysis, something that Prinseps and others who manned the Asiatic Society in later years did not. MacKenzie had a deep knowledge of local customs, politics and economics. Later researchers became very structured in collecting, annotating and creating sources for use by the colonial government.

The essays written in this book span over twenty five years, and also become an annotated addition and commentary on other works by Dirks. So, it is a kind of history and an auto-ethnography of Dirks. When he writes about *The Hollow Crown* (2007), he comments that reviewers have taken note of issues that interested them, which showed how our reading are still held within disciplinary boundaries. Dirks comments on the “well-traveled” corridor between anthropology and history. Perhaps, this corridor is not as “well-traveled” as Dirks would like us to suppose, from his perspective, especially since his mentor was Bernard Cohn. Cohn’s presence perhaps ensured that Dirks saw a well-traveled pathway between anthropology and history all around him. Through his pathway to culture by analyzing its politics, Dirks gives us his take on what this kind of analysis really entails. Through this passage, Dirks gives his own idea of a definition of culture, something crucial to anthropological analysis, and a problematic for Dirks. Having said that, it would be necessary for us to note, whether this methodology is any different from those of the post-colonialist and post-modernist studies of his time.

My argument about politics, however, is always somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, I insist that I am giving priority to the cultural construction of power; on the other, I follow that construction through the referential narratives of a historical field where the political becomes a mobile sign of struggle and change. Nevertheless, it was, and is, my conviction that the strength of this work builds on the recognition of the necessity of contradiction, the relentless transitivity of text and context, of meanings exposed and concealed – in this instance, a sense that politics is neither available as a transparent analytic category nor contained solely within the cultural statements that ground any analysis of meaning. Culture, in other words, is never an autonomous or a stable category of analysis. Culture, as well as the other key terms, politics and history, exist as “supplements” – adding only to replace, or insinuating themselves in place of the original, only then to become the original that in turn becomes written over and replaced again. Supplementarity suggests why structures must remain open, why no synthesis can be anything more than provisional. [74-75]

Based on the above principles, one sees the basic ideas for his previous book *Castes of Mind* (2001) as a set of “multiple and contextually determined” principles that form the referents for identity, different sets of them being significant at different locations or times (88). It is then entirely logical for Dirks to

see ritual, not only as a site of order as seen by most anthropologists, but also as a site of resistance in chapter five of *Autobiography of an Archive*.

One of these traditions in South India forms the focus of Dirks' interest – that of hook-swinging. Of course, hook-swinging – a means by which iron hooks embedded in the skin of the back were used to swing an individual from tall poles at certain festivals – is also found in other parts of the country including in the Eastern Indian provinces, even today. The use of the practice as a means of looking at the Indian population as requiring the civilizing experience of the British was seen by Dirks as a means of using colonial power to undervalue Indian traditions. Simultaneously, this outlook of the colonial government attempted to divorce hook-swinging from “mainstream” or “book view” approaches of Hindu religion, so that it could be shown as an event that was not being supported by a majority of the Hindus. It was a private event done to satisfy pecuniary interests and to satisfy temple priests. This would thus open the way to its abolishment. For Dirks, This was a way of understanding how the colonial government looked at Indian society, substituting a colonial version of Hindu religion manufactured by them as opposed to the kind of religion which was actually lived.

Dirks then moves on to the historical formation of Empire by a colonial government. Through a wealth of detail involving the case of Warren Hastings and the prosecution carried out by Edmund Burke, Dirks contrasts the idea of an Imperial Sovereignty as opposed to a peculiarly local National Sovereignty as seen through the operations of the colonial government and administration. The idea that the colonial government itself was the root source of corruption, as exposed by Burke, was another idea that was developed by Dirks as one of the pathways to Empire. This showed how the Company used corruption to gain access to useful pieces of property, objects of power and personal riches. Through these pathways, Dirks showed that the corrupt practices of Hastings was the backdrop for the change of power from the Company to the British government. Once this change of power was established, Hastings was exonerated, since different practices of acceptance became the norm. Eventually, these views were carried forward by Lord Wellesley and Lord Dalhousie.

The essays in this volume show Dirks moving from peculiarly local anthropological pursuits to larger arenas through to a historical perspective of the Indian scenario. Yet, having learned much through these pursuits, he then begins focusing first on the disciplines that he works so hard to link together, history and anthropology, the very academic arenas that he is a part. In other words, having learned of the world through his academic wisdom, he comes back home to use the same methodological focus on the areas closest to him.

Whatever Dirks discusses, he does not let go of his enthusiasm for linking and problematizing the relationship between history and anthropology. He is also concerned about the position of culture in

this scenario. For Matthew Arnold, the Victorian view of culture showed it to be “tamed” and “harnessed” to the use of the state in controlling the unruly mobs “that threatened the pretensions and peace of a democratizing and secularizing England” (236). Culture was thus a ruin, in terms of being both “material” and “ethereal,” “history” and “memory,” “achievement” and “failure,” “reality” and “representation,” inspiring life as well as death (240-241). Using this as a background, a short but insightful analysis of the work of G.S. Ghurye shows Dirks' own personal, political and academic biases and leanings.

He then goes on to discuss the historical account of the beginning of “area studies” within American Universities and the teaching and academic interest in the South Asian region. This is especially seen through the many academic specialists who were known in this field of study, but he focuses on some in much greater detail. He shows how McKim Marriott and Robert Redfield get in touch with each other and begin their collaboration at the University of Chicago in the late 1940s, and how Singer became an important part of the Ford Foundation program in this area in 1951 (272). He traces this to current associations through the introduction of Bernard Cohn into the program. Using the analyses described earlier, he showed how post-colonial academic research incorporated colonial ideas with minor modifications as a core part of their work, using this (“flawed”?) background to interpret the general principles of the country’s politics, policies, economics and other institutions (274-275). When he talks of the contributions of academics from India, Dirks makes the mistake of attributing the flow of other academic disciplines through anthropology departments as a sign that those who worked there were all to be considered as anthropologists, like the mention of Veena Das (285). All academic anthropologists in India are clear about the fact that Das may have written about anthropological issues but remains a sociologist, from a premier institute of sociology, who had come into academic work through courses in sociology. In hindsight, then, this muddling of specialized disciplinary boundaries may be one of the things Dirks was always very happy to find.

The book begins with an introduction, which shows how the “area studies” program was begun in American universities through an interest in gathering intelligence through the Office of Strategic Services and then the CIA, mediated by the Fulbright program. This is further elaborated in detail showing how this kind of work took precedence in many of the premier universities in America. The problematic relationship of Franz Boas with the government was also made clear, since he was a member of the Friends of India Association. Dirks went on to join the Boas chair in Anthropology at Columbia University and thus began a period of learning about the work and commitments of Franz Boas and his relationship with the government. In fact, Boas became quite unpopular because he did not support many government interests in South Asian countries, thus becoming labeled as giving a

“German” view of society. He was to leave Columbia University for Barnard for a decade before being invited back again in 1929 on this account. This account then goes on to visit the various kinds of scholars who became spies for the government through a variety of programs, a prelude to the Human Terrain systems conflict going on in anthropology more recently. However, in all his accounts of academia, one misses out on the inclusion of the context of gender within this picture. Through these pathways Dirks shows how the American public were gradually treated to an increasing array of a variety of cultures, lives, zones, areas and minds.

This is an incredible book, a work that needs to be relished slowly, repeatedly and with different perspectives in mind. It encourages thought and fresh ideas. Yet, sometimes, one nagging thought remains. Is it actually true that all these categories, especially the basic ideas of caste that we have learned about, and their emphases, are colonial constructs? In fact, a nagging suspicion is that these categories relating to caste differed from person-to-person and from area-to-area as well as from community-to-community. This is true of all concepts gleaned as ethnographic products. It is also true that our writings and the social context of these writings affect the outcome of these issues. In the historical genealogy of these concepts (like caste), unraveling their complex journey of ontology and meaning would itself be “good to think.” Was there, then, no indigeneity in all of these “categories of the mind” described by Dirks?

References Cited

Dirks, Nicholas

2007. *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ghosh, Amitav

1992. *In An Antique Land*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher.

Abhik Ghosh is Professor in Social Anthropology and at present Chairperson at the Department of Anthropology, Panjab University, Chandigarh. He has worked in India, mainly in the eastern and north-western regions, on tribal symbolism, ecology, health and medicine, policy analyses and insurgency.

