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TRIBUTE

‘Development for whom?’: Remembering the concerns that drove activist-anthropologist LK Mahapatra

June 1 is the first death anniversary of the man who played a key role in shaping the discipline of anthropology in India.

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Pioneering anthropologist LK Mahapatra.

I was understandably nervous when I met Lakshman Kumar Mahapatra for the first time in 2004. He was the elder statesman of tribal studies in India. He wanted to engage a law student for a study relating to tribal rights and entitlements in land, forests and other resources. One of my teachers thought I'd be a good fit.

When I first saw him in his study, he was immersed in writing. He raised his head slightly and smiled. That immediately put me at ease.

Working closely with him on the project profoundly shaped my thinking about vulnerable populations. It was my first experience of field work. Mahapatra had pushed me to go and live with the Adivasis to really understand them. He warned me that unless the colour of my skin became the same as theirs, unless I became a part of their lives, I would never be able to gain any insight into their conditions.

On the first anniversary of his passing on June 1, this is the opportunity to recall the profound impression Mahapatra left on the discipline of anthropology in India.

Over the next few years as I got to know him better, I found that as the chairperson of the NKC Centre for Development Studies in Bhubaneswar, he had the same advice for researchers from disciplines such as economics that do not traditionally engage in much field work.

Mahapatra had the fire of an activist, a burning desire to bring about change. He was already in his seventies and I felt like he feared that it was his last chance.

I realised that he had decided to study anthropology because of its promise to bring to light the problems faced by oppressed people, particularly Adivasis, and thereby help improve their conditions.



Mahapatra, who was born in 1929, had a brilliant student career, having stood second in the state in matriculation in 1946. He knew that if he was not among the top students, he would be deprived of scholarships and the opportunity of continuing his studies. He had thought he would study economics till he attended a lecture and for the first time heard about the new discipline of anthropology.

That winter of 1947, the 16-year-old knew that was how he wanted to contribute to the promise of independent India. But, as he lamented in a felicitation volume published on his retirement as a professor, the activism in the initial years of his career had given way to building institutions and institutionalising the discipline of anthropology in Odisha and in India.

He was a topper at Calcutta University, where the academic study of anthropology started in India. He also taught at the new bastions of anthropology in Lucknow and Dharwad. But at the first opportunity, he returned home to Odisha to join the fledgling anthropology department at Utkal University. Heading the department between 1967 and 1989, he built it into one of India's Centres of Advanced Study.

Expanding the horizon

He did much to expand the horizons of anthropology in India, which he feared had been caught in a trap of being perceived merely as tribal studies. Rather, he saw it as a comparative social science and as a comparative historical discipline that had great relevance for the present and the future. Hence, he ensured that research in the department was conducted on diverse areas such as temples and monasteries of Bhubaneswar and Puri, Hindu princes and princedoms, the caste system and mobility in the caste system, ritual kinship and kinship systems and urban slums as well as village life.

In an attempt to prove that Indian anthropologists were as good as their counterparts in the rest of the world, he was keen to break the practice of Indian

anthropologists being limited to research in their own region – unlike western anthropologists, who would study other cultures. He started exploring study of other cultures for independent research and advocated that other Indians do so as well.

He was the pioneer in India in conducting research in South East Asia and its cultural linkages with India. Under his academic leadership, Utkal University became the first university to offer teaching of South-East Asia as a collaborate offering of the departments of anthropology, history and geography. He was also the founder-editor of the first international social science journal from India on the region, *South-East Asian Perspectives*.





LK Mahapatra in the field.

Mahapatra conducted extensive fieldwork in South-East Asia, starting out as a Director of a UNESCO research project on swidden or shifting cultivation in Asia in 1979-'80. Even now his writings on shifting cultivation are considered definitive.

Shifting cultivation was for him, a sustainable tribal practice and was an example of what was lost, when, in many cases, Adivasis were forcibly displaced from their lands due to development projects. Research on displacement and subsequent resettlement and rehabilitation of tribals was another field of enquiry he pioneered in the country. In 1979, when the Indravati dam project

started to bring water to the drought-prone Kalahandi and neighbouring districts, it ended up displacing many villages, mostly Adivasi. The government did little to understand or address their problems.

Mahapatra took a group of MA students to study the socio-cultural, economic and psychological problems of the Adivasis ousted from their lands. In response to his appeal, the government finally sent an officer to address the problems faced by the Adivasis.

He did not rest there. He went on to convene an international symposium on the issue of displacement due to development projects at the International Congress of Anthropologists in 1983 in Vancouver, where he asked the very provocative question for the first time, “Development for whom?”

‘Militant social anthropologist’

Thus developed a close relationship and friendship with Michael Cernea, who introduced sociological approaches into the World Bank, which funded many of these development projects. Cernea, who led the sociology team in the World Bank till his retirement never missed an opportunity to talk about that provocative address that was a searing critique of the indifferent approach of governments to the problems faced by tribals.

Cernea always described Mahapatra as “India’s leading militant social anthropologist” and acknowledged his significant contribution to policy making on resettlement and rehabilitation across the world.

Mahapatra would always ask, “Are you integrating the project affected people in your decision making or are you thrusting on them what you think is good enough for them?” He opposed simple monetary compensation for people displaced by development projects but also opposed the fact that compensation in land was seen as good enough.

“Have you asked them what kind of land they want?” he would ask. “What kind of homes they want? Have you tried to find out if everyone thinks in the same way, or if there are groups with different wants and who might need a different kind of compensation?”

He went beyond most thinkers in forcing scholars and administrators in thinking about and addressing questions of inter-generational equity, about replacement costs (of trees on the land, for instance) and not just land.

I was never took any classes with Mahapatra but I learnt from him by spending time with him, by working with him and by interacting with others on his behalf, the way he wanted me to conduct research on Adivasis. The perspectives I had gained from him continue to guide my work.

I continue to see the historical injustices and discrimination suffered by tribal peoples, and understand the importance of his prescription of self-managed development and self-determination of tribal people.

I hope that the promise of the anthropological approach that fired the imagination of the young Mahapatra continues to guide the work of academics and administrators in creating a better world for people as they want it – not the way powerful hope it will be.

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