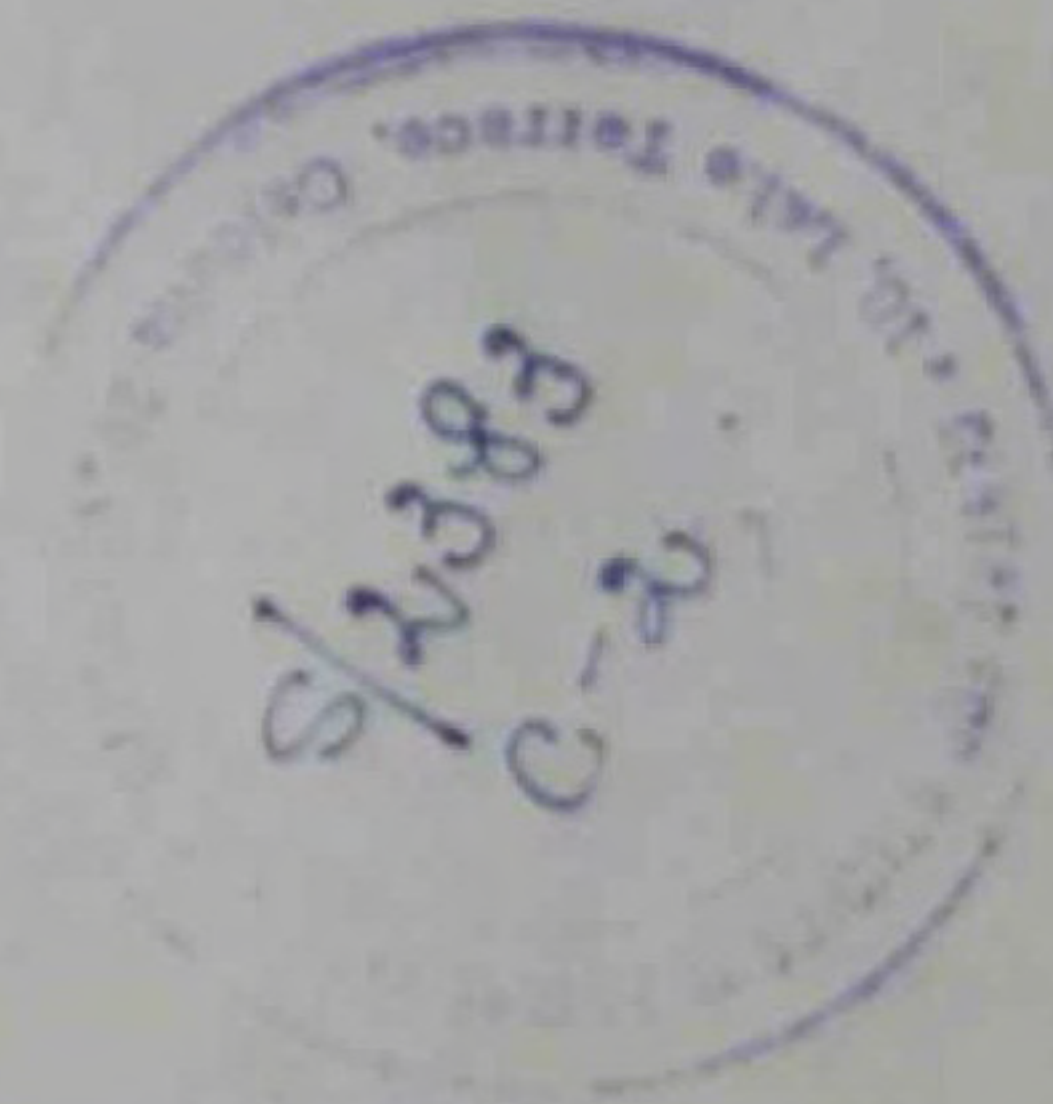


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THE STRUCTURE OF STRUCTURE OR THE APPROPRIATION  
OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY

ANJAN GHOSH

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Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta  
10 Lake Terrace  
Calcutta-700029.



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"Between our attitude towards them and  
their attitude towards us, there is  
and can be no parity."

(Levi-Strauss : 1966)

I

In a recent paper which traverses the shifts in anthropological theory over the last two decades, Sherry Ortner (1984) has ably demonstrated how the concern with 'symbol', 'nature' and 'structure' has given way to 'practice' and 'history'. Yet notwithstanding her admirable exposition of the key concepts of anthropological theory, her account remains curiously oblivious of the context in which the shifts have occurred. For underlying the change from the morphology of meaning to the process of its construction lies an awareness of effacement and the efforts at restoration of self on the part of the erstwhile objects of study of anthropologists. The former aspect is implied in Johannes Fabian's (1985:9) notion of 'disappearance', for in constructing its object of study cultural anthropology is not concerned with emerging societies but with disappearing ones. It is the contact with the 'West' which engenders the disappearance of 'primitive societies' and their constitution as 'other cultures' (Beattie: 1964). This awareness was present even among the founding fathers of anthropology as is evident from this statement by Adolph Bastian :

"For us, primitive societies are ephemeral,  
that is, as regards our knowledge of and

aspirations, the latter often ignored them or were suspicious of their involvement with the 'natives' (Kuper : 1973 : Ch.4, James : 1973 : 41-70). Colonial administrators were interested in anthropology to understand the functioning of indigenous societies. More than eliciting cooperation of their subjects which was called forth largely at times of exigencies like war, colonial administration was keen to know about the ways of 'native' society to be able to manipulate them for its own purpose. Thus C.K. Meek, a Nigerian government official, posited the anthropologist's role as the providing of

'data which would help the government to make the fullest use of native institutions as instruments of local administrations' (quoted in Feuchtwang : 1973:88).

Anthropology was to help in those situations where the colonial officials could not identify their 'natural allies' among the subject people. Lord Hailey, another colonial administrator in Africa, aptly elucidates the nature of anthropological cooperation solicited as,

'where administrators encountered cultures which were to them of a novel type, and where they did not find personnel of a class which they could readily associate with themselves in the formation of the legal administrative institutions of the country' (quoted in Feuchtwang : 1973:88).

In India the distinction between anthropologists and officials was obliterated under British colonial rule. It was the colonial administrators who engaged in ethnographic studies. Moreover ethnographic data-gathering and classification was directly sponsored by the colonial state through the Census

and the 'Tribes and Castes' volume. But the rationale was not very different. In his Tribes and Castes of Bengal, Risley notes the administrative purpose of his ethnographic survey as providing the requisite information for governance :

'native society is made up of a network of subdivisions governed by rules which affect every department of life, and that, in Bengal at any rate, next to nothing is known about the system upon which the whole native population regulates its domestic and social relations. If legislation or even executive action is ever to touch these relations in a satisfying manner, an ethnographic survey of Bengal, and a record of the customs of the people, is ... necessary' (Risley, Vol.1, 1891:vii).

It is significant that the administrative objective of Risley's ethnographic enquiries could coexist without any uneasiness with its scientific goals of enriching the 'comparative ethnology in Europe' (Risley, Vol.1, 1891:iv). Risley himself spelled it out thus :

'From the standpoint of the modern science of anthropology, it was hoped that it might be possible, by careful observation and record of the social practices now prevailing in Bengal, to arrive at fresh data throwing light on the ethnological problems which scientific men such as Sir John Lubbock, Sir Henry Maine, Mr. E.B. Tylor, Herr Bachofen, M. Fustel de Coulanges and Herr Adolf Bastian, have discussed in Europe' (Risley, Vol.1, 1891:vi).

Risley as one of the founders of anthropology in India set the tone of relationship between colonialism and anthropology.

Statecraft and scientific enquiries were thus inextricably entangled in this 'colonial sociology' (Bandopadhyay : 1986). It also set the pattern of intellectual subordination where the anthropologist from the periphery was to engage in the supply of data for metropolitan theorists.

This collusion with colonialism is only one aspect of anthropology's relation with power. It also functioned more insidiously by constructing and reconstructing myths about the colonised (Macquat : 1964). Colonialism set up its own discourse of power in which the 'natives' were silenced. Their own discourses were either effaced or subordinated, their idioms robbed of their meaning. Constrained from authentic self-expression, the colonised existed only in and through the notions of the colonisers. The onset of derivative discourse constricted indigenous creativity.

The nationalist self-assertion which accompanied the national liberation movements in the Third World (especially Africa and Asia) after World War II initially raised the question of dismantling the ideological notion of the colonised. And when in the wake of the exposures of Project Camelot (Horowitz : 1967) and Project Agile (Wolf and Jorgensen : 1970) the direct links between anthropology and counter-insurgency research were established, the political function of anthropological research came in for severe indictment (CA : 1968, Lewis : 1973, Pathy : 1981, Saberwal : 1968, Huizer and Mannheim : 1979, Asad : 1973). But while its political ramifications have been criticised and exposed, yet its ideological content and legacy received less attention (Asad : 1973, Magubane : 1971, Hau'ofa : 1974). This constituted the context of the crisis in anthropology during the early 1970s

(Ardener : 1971, Banaji : 1969, Godard : 1969, Needham : 1970, Worsley : 1966). It did not merely stem from the plurality of paradigms which pervaded anthropology at this juncture, but its inability to come to terms with itself in accordance with its own history.

### III

At the root of the problem of anthropological theory is the question of accumulation. In this case the accumulation of empirical facts. Every accumulation is also an appropriation which has to be transformed. Thus money or wealth has to be converted into capital - a productive entity, before it can reproduce itself. Similarly with knowledge mere collection or collation of information is insufficient, it has to be transformed into concepts and theories. It is this transformation process of fact into theory and its consequences which is the subject of this paper. For it is here that the ideological appropriation occurs and theoretical disarticulation in the understanding of Third World people and their culture takes place. The intention is to indicate the structural constraint or block which this mediation imposes on social anthropologists of underdeveloped countries.

To begin with, why theory? Primarily because without theory there are no facts. The distinction itself is naive and untenable because

'when we, scientists, speak of only facts, we mean a product of omission, selection and inference' (Nadel quoted in Manners and Kaplan : 1968).'

In effect, then, knowledge cannot exist without a theoretical frame. It is the latter which imparts significance to facts. As Myrdal puts it succinctly, 'a non-theoretical approach is, in strict logic, unthinkable' (Myrdal quoted in Manners and Kaplan : 1968).

Theories are concerned with causal or interpretive explanations in order to organise knowledge. There are different kinds of theories but as such they are constructs of reality. Meehan writes :

'Theories are abstract and symbolic constructions, and not descriptions of data or inductive generalizations from observations. Theories relate general statements by appealing to underlying similarities, not to observable properties ... The link between theory and generalization is conceptual and empirical. Some of the non-logical terms in a theory refer to nothing that is directly observable. These theoretical terms are extremely important, for they give a theory its generalizing power and provide the linkage between theory and generalization', (quoted in Manners and Kaplan : 1968, emphasis in the original).

The production of theory calls for more than a 'process of induction from empirical data', an 'imaginative leap' from facts. Moreover, theories must not only explain or interpret but also generate new facts and hypotheses.

The production of anthropological theory must, however, be located within its historical specificity. Creation of concepts or what has been earlier referred to as theoretical terms in anthropology is endowed with a problem, for



'not only does the anthropologist operate within his own conceptual framework, but the people he studies operate within their own conceptual framework or frameworks' (Manners and Kaplan : 1972).

This entails the 'translation of culture' (Beidelman : 1972). Yet every translation is constrained by the terms of the translator's reference. Freeman spells these out :

'the assumptions which colour the expression of a theory reflects the methodological assumption of its author.'

He goes on to add that

'the theories of a given time and place are stated in such a fashion that they reflect the Weltanschauung - the basic philosophy - of the culture in which they emerge' (Freeman : 1968).

Hence translations are conditioned by the translator's culture, as concepts are not sui generis but require to be located in their social context. Their meanings emanate from this construction not from their transparencies (Gellner : 1969). The terms of reference of this construction have been laid out for anthropology at its genesis through the colonial encounter (Asad : 1973, Gough : 1968). The relations of power encompassed the mode of knowing about the subject people. Categories and concepts were thus invested with meanings previously absent among the indigenous people.

Concepts are the ideological prisms for the accumulation of anthropological knowledge. They are constituted

through the 'translation of culture' and hence represent its unilaterality. The translation enterprise has proceeded unidirectionally with the Western anthropologists drawing upon their experiences in the 'other cultures' to construct concepts and theoretical frameworks. In spite of an expanding and 'internationalist' world, the flow has never been reversed. It is the non-Western world which has been constructed as the 'other', not the other way round, thus imbricating the insignia of power in the anthropological enterprise. What is more, it has led to the reproduction of the anthropological enterprise in the periphery with little consciousness of this dimension. Here we shall analyse this process through two concepts for illustration : 'tribe' and 'labour'.

### Tribe

The concept of tribe, though ubiquitous in anthropology, has remained a contentious one. Its vicissitudes in India demonstrate its ideological nature. The notion of tribe has generally been associated with a largely undifferentiated pre-state segmentary formation (Nag : 1968:194). However, its usage in colonial contexts transformed the meaning. Envisaged within an evolutionary scheme of things, the concept of tribe became a nomenclature for primitivism and backwardness of the subject people, constituting their difference with the European colonisers. It thus endowed the colonialists with a self-appointed mission of 'civilising' them.

More recently, two approaches to the concept has emerged, one emphasizing tribe as a necessary stage of historical evolution and the other stressing its configurational aspect. Beteille (1986:298) has characterized the approaches

as 'evolutionary' and 'historical', distinguished by the former's stress on a long-term view and 'the succession of social formations', while the latter underscores 'the co-existence of different social formations within that framework'. The evolutionary perspective has a long vintage in anthropology denoting a level of socio-economic evolution (Sahlins : 1961, 1968, Godelier : 1977), while the historical approach indicates the construction of a tribe through the relationship of dominance between a state and non-state society. Morton Fried who championed the latter approach elucidates the process of secondary tribalization :

'The invention of the state, a tight, class-structured political and economic organization, began a process whereby vaguely defined and grossly overlapping populations were provided with the minimal organization required for their manipulation, even though they had little or no internal organization of their own other than that based on conceptions of kinship. The resultant form was that of the tribe' (Fried : 1975 : Preface).

For most Third World countries, the formation of present-day tribes was occasioned by the impact of colonialism. Colonial governance not only evoked the evolutionary classification of tribals but also created them. It was the political efficacy of the concept of tribe which has been highlighted by critical Third World scholars. P.C. Uchendu (1970), a Nigerian scholar, remarks :

'the word "tribe" as applied to many West African societies lack a precise meaning. When large population groups like the Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa, each numbering over 5 million, possessing a common language, a

similar "sense of historical experience", a common world view, and sharing a very strong sense of common identity in relation to other population groups - characteristics associated with national entities - are not terminologically distinguished from smaller descent groups, one wonders how absurd "convenient labels" can become.'

In a vein similar to Fried, Skinner (1968 : 181) has examined the phenomenon of tribes and tribalism in Africa :

'It is unfortunate that "tribalism" with all its connotations of primitivity and traditionalism is the name given for the identity being used by groups competing for power and prestige in contemporary Africa. Some of the names which are now used as symbols for group identity do refer to distinct socio-cultural entities in the past. However, many of the so-called "tribal" groups were creations of the colonial period. But even those groups for which continuity with the past could be claimed have lost so many of their traditional characteristics that in fact they must be viewed as new entities.'

In India too, tribes were constructed under colonialism. There was no term in the Indian languages which corresponded to the concept of the tribe enumerated in the Oxford Dictionary as 'a race of people; now applied especially to a primary aggregate of people in a primitive or barbarous condition, under a headman or chief'. Before the advent of British rule in India, the autochthonous communities were known as janas. Both the terms jana and jati are derived from the root jan meaning 'to be born' or 'to give birth to' thus implying a primordial community. Till the 18th century the terms jana (tribe) and jati (castes) were synonymously used signifying no major hiatus (Ray : 1972:7-9). British colonialism

completely transformed the situation. In their search for cognisable categories and corporate groups, colonial officials imposed their conceptual vocabulary on alien social groups. The result was a social closure not prevalent before (Cohn : 1986, Fuller : 1977).

It was the colonial officials-turned-anthropologists who first used the term 'tribe' to denote a specific social group. In the Censuses from 1881 to 1931, the distinction between caste, tribe and race was not rigorously maintained. What distinguished the tribals was their geographical isolation and animism. There was considerable regional variation in the enumeration of tribes in the Census (Shah : 1980:2). From the 1930s the concept of tribe acquired a certain specificity. In 1935 the Government of India Act classified a number of tribes as 'backward tribes' in an effort to protect them through special legislation. After independence the Constitution of India basically incorporated the same as the list of Scheduled Tribes under Article 342. The list undergoes periodic revisions and presently includes more than 400 such communities, compared to 212 included in the Constitutional Order of 1950, with a total population of over 50 million comprising 7.76 per cent of the country's population (Beteille: 1986:299). Inclusion in the scheduled list has now become a crucial aspect of tribal self-identity as it entails privileged access to scarce resources like political representation and employment.

The continuity of the Colonial policy towards tribals in post-independence India is striking. Even as no serious attempt was undertaken to redefine the concept of tribe, it was reduced to an administrative category of the tribal

people separated from the self-perceptions. Thus a tribe has been defined by its inclusion in the scheduled list as B.N. Sahay indicates : 'a tribe is a tribe which is included in the list of the scheduled tribes' (quoted in Pathy et.al. : 1976:402). Similarly Fuchs (1974:23) has also accepted as definitive the scheduled list of tribes. Yet little uniformity of criteria was employed by the government to include tribal groups in different parts of the country in the constitutional list (Shah : 1980:3). In post-independent India, the rhetoric of 'the civilising mission' has been transformed into that of 'integration with the national mainstream'.

The tribe-mainstream distinction emerged from the nationalist discourse on the tribal problem. In its opposition to the exclusivist position of the colonial officials-cum-anthropologist which emphasized the differences between 'tribals' and 'non-tribals', the nationalists (Ghurye : 1963, Bose : 1972) advocated an 'integrationist' policy towards the tribals. The tribes were outside the pale of the Hindu caste system but in constant interaction with it. While Bose (1941) highlighted the symbiotic relationship between tribe and the wider civilization, often leading to the 'Hindu Mode of Tribal Absorption', Ghurye spoke of tribals as 'backward Hindus' and not as 'aboriginals' or 'adivasis'. But the nationalist school of thought, while emphasizing the tribe-Hindu civilization interaction, ignored its unequal and exploitative nature, a phenomenon which has persisted even into the present (Roy Burman : 1983).

It is significant that the Government of India in accordance with the nationalist view does not regard the scheduled tribes as even a section of the 'indigenous people'. Replying to a query on the issue by the U.N. Working Group

on Indigenous Population (U.N. Commission of Human Rights) in 1982 it stated : 'the scheduled tribes are not the only descendants of original inhabitants, rather India is a melting-pot' (quoted in Sengupta : 1986:7). On the other hand tribal groups were exhorted as part of national policy to identify with the "national mainstream", as if they were outside it : The idea of the national mainstream was a reiteration of politico-cultural dominance of Brahmanical Hinduism. Alongside the cultural onslaught many of the central Indian tribes also had to bear the brunt of the costs of economic development facing large scale displacement and marginalisation while the 'mainstream' developed itself (Jones : 1980, Ghosh : 1987).

In their effort to impose order upon ambivalence, the British colonial administration in India characterised tribes by administrative fiat. It sought to construct the primitivity of the tribe in isolation from the civilization within which it was embedded and which it had to confront in order to subjugate. On the other hand, nationalist anthropology even while exposing the segregationist intent and purposes of colonial anthropology, did not shed its relations of power with the tribes nor the ideological overburden of evolutionary anthropology. The idea of tribes as primitive and undifferentiated communities outside the pale of national mainstream persisted even as empirical evidence on the social structure of the tribes indicated otherwise (Shah : 1980:13). The classification of tribals was determined largely by reasons of state and bore little resemblance to the social reality.

### Labour

In the case of 'labour' too, colonialism disarticulated its meaning and significance. As a form of activity, work is

present in all societies. Yet all work is not labour, for the latter implies work of a kind introduced by a transformation of pre-capitalist social relations. This was brought about by colonialism in the periphery, though not in the manner of its 'master narrative' in Europe.

One of the most common rationalizations of colonial rule was in terms of denoting the 'natives' as indolent. Colonialism thus claimed to have introduced the notion of industry or work which was supposedly lacking among indigenous people. Alatas (1977) has demonstrated with specific reference to Malaya that this stereotypical notion of the 'native' forms a part of the ideological arsenal of colonialism. He goes on to show how the spontaneous industry of the Malay was no longer regarded as work under British rule for such industry did not contribute to the accumulation of colonial capital. Work was thus redefined as that activity which augmented colonial capitalist profit. In other words, labour beyond the pale of capitalist appropriation was not recognised as work. This of course did not imply the destruction of the pre-capitalist forms of production in the colony, but its incorporation and subordination to the process of capitalist accumulation.

In India too similar ideas of indolence pervaded the literature of colonialism. James Mill's well known History of India attributed the backwardness of Indian society to the indolence of its people. Remarking on the laziness of the Indian craftsmen, Mill wrote, 'the finer the production, the more slender the force which he is called upon to apply' (quoted in Barber : 1975:130), signifying the lack of effort on the part of the craftsman.



Official British ethnographers in the Central Provinces designated the recalcitrant Chamars whose rebelliousness against rent enhancement had been detrimental to the revenue collection of the colonial administration, as indolent after their intransigence had been quelled (Mukherjee : 1982). The creation of a stereotype explained the behaviour of a recalcitrant group in conformity with colonial perceptions. Even latter-day economists have echoed the colonial administrators in adducing indolence of the labouring population as one of the reasons for India's backwardness under imperial rule. Thus Vera Anstey (1957 : 229) remarks :

'Not only is the labour supply intermittent, fluctuating, lacking in ambition and insensitive to the spur of higher wages, but the customary leisurely methods of work and the bad conditions of life of the urban industrial work reduce his efficiency and output.'

These examples of the creation of myths as a necessary aspect of colonial ideology shows how ethnographic observations were appropriated to serve the purpose of metropolitan dominance through the construction of appropriate concepts - i.e. labour.

#### IV

The above examples illustrate the process by which the theoretical vocabulary of anthropology expressed the relations of power between the colonialists and their subjects. Relations of inequality fundamentally change the meaning and significance of concepts and categories. Universal frames of reference seldom function under such conditions and even cultural relativism adheres to such frames (Chatterjee : 1986:14). Social anthropology emanated from a particular

pattern of power relationship among nations channelling all 'translations' in one direction. Thus all cultures were sought to be understood with reference to a 'master code' embodying the historical experience of the 'West'. Within anthropology there was little opportunity of reversing the flow or of displacing the 'code'. At the root of the crisis of anthropology lies the questioning of this unilateral process. It has called into question the comparative method. Among many others, Evans-Pritchard (1965:25) has emphasized the significance of the comparative method for social anthropology. It was the contrast with the Europeans which was the key to the anthropological enterprise. Yet this comparison was principally amenable to the anthropologist from the metropolis who had the benefit of exposure to 'other cultures'. Till they were able to school a section of the 'natives' to be aliens in their own land, the anthropological exercise could not be implanted in the periphery. This fracture within the body polity of the peripheral states has constrained endogenous concept-formation and theory building.

A major source of theory-building is nationalism which seeks to revitalise the latent paradigms of meaning in the peripheral countries either through the reinvention of religious traditions and idioms (Hobsbawm : 1982) or by trying to reverse the process of secular transaction into 'Swaraj' (Uberoi : 1968). However, nationalist discourses did not alter the relations of dominance radically. They transposed such relations of power between nations to relations within the nation. The international division of intellectual labour was maintained through the presence of the metropolis in the periphery itself. But on a global scale, the hierarchy among the social sciences was composed through the

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apportionment of study terrains into the 'study of culture' (Third World), 'ideology' (socialist societies) and 'science' (modern West) as indicated by Pletsch (1981:579).

The awareness of the unilaterality of comparisons jeopardised the comparative method. More recently, Ford Larsen (1987:26) has 'reminded that our ethnographies are structured by rules of relevance which are not entirely dictated by the cultures we study'. The search for constants, whether in the form of similarities or differences, across cultures and civilizations became suspect. As function gave way to meaning, structure and cosmologies, not without its relations of power in their construction, the science which had set out to explain and interpret the behaviour of the 'other' reversed direction to preoccupy itself with the 'self' (ethnos). Even here the self was not comprised of continuing construction and de-construction, but predefined by traditional texts and normative behaviour or the heritage of the dominant classes. Ethnosociological efforts failed to incorporate the flexibility of social relations extant in the pre-colonial era (Dumont : 1970). Structure transfixed relations into an ahistorical scheme.

Thus anthropological theory evolved within a specific international division of labour. Concepts and theories were produced in the metropolis since the vantage point for comparison lay there. Whereas anthropologists in the periphery engaged in the 'problem-solving' of 'normal science', to use Kuhn's (1970) analogy. Within the paradigmatic exposition of anthropological theory, facts were appropriated by theory. But metropolitan theory could not be overthrown by facts alone. For that, alternative concepts and paradigms were required. The concepts had to change before the facts could

be understood and arranged differently.

To assert their autonomy, the ethnographers of the periphery require alternative concepts and theories, as the experience of the dominators and the dominated diverge. This calls for the construction of endogenous concepts and theories to articulate the relations in the periphery. It is not only a search for relevance or appropriateness which calls for endogenous theory construction (Riggs : 1987), it is a necessary pre-requisite for shifting the locus of paradigm change to the periphery. So far it was the 'West' which defined the 'other', it is time the 'West' was defined as the 'other' by its victims.

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