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Dimensions of Granularity



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HEIDEMANN, FRANK – ZEHMISCH, PHILIPP (Eds.) (2016): *Manifestations of History. Time, Space, and Community in the Andaman Islands*. Delhi, Primus Books. 187 p.

It has always been a worrying challenge of research program leaders and book editors to initiate and find common *leitmotifs*, when they specify the conceptual and methodological framework of a cooperation, and later, when try to extract and reveal common patterns from the completed contributions. How to order the colorful, heterogenous, distinct pieces into one-directional, convergent, cohesive, unitary set of papers as chapters, under the sun of bigger theoretical horizons?

Even the longtime Andaman researchers can learn a lot and refresh their views about this extraordinary (spatial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious) assemblage, thanks to this selection of well-written, partly synoptic papers: outcomes of a Munich, 2013 conference.

We can zoom to the penal settlement aspects, following the 1858 way of a solidarity-creating Muslim scholar into the Cellular Jail, which has culturally reconfigured as the “Indian Bastille” in the fight against colonial oppression (Jamal MALIK). Clare ANDERSON opens out

the Warneford family archive, reconstructing the (material and spiritual) presence of a British family in the colonization period, while Claire WINTLE interconnects the (contested) interpretations and display of material objects with identity shaping, from a museum anthropology perspective. Satadru SEN confronts us with the calamities and traps of indigenous Andamanese (Jarawa, Onge, Great Andamanese, Sentinelese) becoming citizens of a modern postcolonial nation. *'Primitives in the national zoo'*. Although the ill-informed and mostly illiterate Sri Lankan repatriates became citizens of India and got work and a piece of tribal land, it cannot be converted into settler land, and they had to find their own voice against the state machinery to improve their life (Frank HEIDEMANN). In the meantime, the forest clearing, contract labourer Ranchis, *"the (infrastructure) builders of modern Andaman"* since 1918 are working and living in a marginalized transitory zone 'between civilization and wilderness' (Philipp ZEHMISCH). No surprise, that the identity formation and territorial differentiation of Pre-42 communities resulted dissimilarities in their world views (Kanchan MUKHOPADHYAY). In contrary, as Manish CHANDI illustrates fascinatingly, Nicobarese folktales and legends can serve as common 'rationale', regulating the methods of 'resource use, conservation and partitioning' – norms and practices.

This multiplicity and multitudinousness should have provide enough possibility to find common insights far beyond the indicated narratives. Now, I think that the *'space versus time'* (the priority of spatial basis of perception over against the temporal ones) is an overwrought, nearly useless methodological straitjacket. There is no need to fight *'against monopolist, Euro-American, time-centered history'*, or *'hegemonic Western frameworks, dominated by science, post-Enlightenment rationalism and reason'*. It is more, than obvious, that contemporary Andamans *'laid more emphasis on places, locations, regions, territories, and other spatial dimensions'* than others, since their multi-territorial background and current geographical discursiveness, as an inheritance of 'colonially-incubated modernity' (SEN). No intentions from a non-existing 'other side' of history making to ignore the spatial aspects or overwrite them with temporal ones (while *'decolonizing the hegemonic episteme of elite history'* is a never-falling, valid narrative).

Anyway, this artificial opposition is mainly based and feasible at all because of inconsistent usage of 'History' itself. Let me to provide an ad hoc list of strongly different meanings and aspects of 'history', collected from the book. A *'discipline of historical science'* (of which *'historiography'* is only a subdiscipline) made by professionals is unopposable against the *'conceptualization of the past'*, *'construction of the past'*, *'referring to the past'* by different groups and individuals. *'Oral history'*, *'life history'*, *'community-oriented history'* and *'cultural memory'* refers only to the selected investigation modes and domains, as parts and components of *'historical consciousness'*. *'Periodization of history'* and the *'conceptualizations of understanding and writing history'* require disciplinary abstraction from the observer-researchers, while the *'contemplation of the past (imaginative anamnesis)'* is very personal – and not equal with *'telling one's own history'*. Even they are very close to each other, the *'complex process of self-canonicalization'* is not equal with *'identity making by history'*, and the *'historicization'* of things in a given context has different function, than the *'usage of past to understand the present'*. It is too easy to find *'manifestations'* in every enumerated aspects.

Interestingly, we can identify consonant approaches after all. The authors recurrently highlight the forms of simultaneities: the *'multistory view'* or *'multiple view of history'*, the role of *'coexisting perceptions'*, *'shared tradition'* and *'creative mutuality'*. Moreover, it is a part of the

entangled nature of the field: as *'identities are fragmented and fractured'*, they are constantly overlapping with not only the three structuring patterns (time, space, and community), but the local combinations of religious and linguistic perspectives and practices. Even the *'objects...are polysemic and can contain several and incongruent meanings as they come into contact with the agendas of different audiences'* as Claire WINTLE reminds us. It is not enough to unravel the four kinds of migration: there are disparate differences between settlers and local borns, between generations of local borns, between families of the same ethnic group, and even between members of the same family (just check the story of the Perumals). As Kanchan MUKHOPADHYAY recognizes: *'identity issues are manipulated by different sections of a group's members'*. He formulates the hidden micropattern: *'the combination of attributes makes one niche distinguishable from another, even though they share similar ecological characters'*.

So, the ultimate question is: which kind of *granularity* we need – if granularity means the adequate level of detail, considered in a model or a (causal) reconstruction process. The greater the granularity, the deeper the level of detail. From a granular point of view, anthropologists must retrace and jigsaw every difference-constituting element of selected events, structures, and actors, aiming to identify the decisive *'factors beyond the actors control'* as well. In this puzzle game, getting the swing of *'the rhythms of everyday'*, grains are not simply facts of the past, but contextual relations, too, buckled by the serendipitous cobweb of affordances. In this epistemological space the recognition is always a *'construction work with potential meanings'*, including the *'iconic representations'*, which *'Andamans have been pregnant with'* (Jamal MALIK). So, the constructions of the pasts (!) are *reiterations*, while historical reflections (with Jörn RÜSEN's worlds) are *'interpretive recollections'*.

We are there. *'Ethnographic subjects allow us to return to the places where thought is born'* - sums up Sita VENKATESWAR in the Afterword, citing Joao BIEHL. To sense the granular nature of these places, where history is also created, open out the large, supplementary map, and contemplate, playing upon the spatial patterns, standing out from the distribution of different communities on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. And return scores of time, when pick an insight in this outstanding collection, anywhere.

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