

# **Making Sense of ‘Anthropological-self’ in the Interactions with the ‘Scholarly Other’**

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## **Abstract**

*The origin of anthropology in the mid-nineteenth century coincided with the establishment and intensification of colonialism. The colonial administrators made use of the anthropological method to understand local populations for a variety of purposes. It made the discipline as an applied science since its inception. Since then, anthropologists have been deployed to understand various social conventions to design and implement culturally acceptable policies and programmes. The range of issues covered in anthropological studies made it an exhaustive and inclusive discipline. In such context, the rhetoric ‘anthropology studies everything about human life above the sky, under the sky and beneath the earth’ sounds realistic. It gave ample scope and flexibility for anthropologists to work effortlessly in multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary settings. However, the academic hierarchies pose multiple challenges for anthropologists in the interaction with the ‘scholarly other.’ Such interactions based on imagined power relations occasionally lead to dilemmas, confrontation and identity crisis. But, the scope and the method of anthropology helps in accommodating ‘other perspectives’ and addressing the dilemmas while not ignoring the ‘scholarly self.’ It also enables anthropologists to convey the essence of anthropological knowledge and its application efficiently. The author reflects on the theme from the experience of working in multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary academic environment.*

## **Key words:**

Interdisciplinary, Multidisciplinary, scholarly interactions, power relations, anthropology

## **Introduction:**

A significant attribute of writing is the ability to communicate not only with others but with oneself. Anthropological fieldwork enables to realize the essence of scholarship and knowledge in this realm. The methods data of collection, analysis and interpretation give anthropologists valuable insights and assist in making sense of the anthropological-self. But, like every other arena of human life, the power relations influence the academic disciplines too. They attempt to collaborate and confront. The methods they administer to understand phenomena may vary. This gives ample scope to differ and debate. As long as scholars from different disciplines

engage in debate, it won't produce any bias. Rather, it enriches one's understanding. But, this depends on the ideas of a person/scholar relating to knowledge system.

**A few encounters and observations:**

Here I would like to draw your attention to a few of my experiences and encounters with anonymity. The following statements reveal several dimensions of scholarly practices, scholars and scholarship. They include; prejudices, lack of understanding, ignorance, failure to realize the essence of other knowledge systems, domain centric notions, hierarchical thinking and power relations in time and space. Few of the experiences are as follows.

**Observation 1: *“The anthropological observations are less scientific and lacks significance”***

It is essential to examine whether the above statement itself is scientific or not. The validity of the statement depends on the knowledge the person or scholar having on the domain he/she commenting. I notice the fact that the statement made out of the absolute bias and ignorance but not with commendable knowledge of the field. The scholar ignored the explanations anthropology offers and believing it is only descriptive and interpretive domain. Therefore, for the scholar it becomes commonsense.

**Observation 2: *“The research output is arbitrary, never comes up with concrete outcomes”***

It is another common statement on anthropological research by the scholars of other social science disciplines. What is not arbitrary is a question in the context. Since, it is less likely to have entirely objective observations in any of the social sciences, for that matter in sciences as well, every scholarly practice would become arbitrary at one level or the other. In fact, anthropological research would become very objective with the long-term fieldwork tradition if the appropriate methods employed for the research. At the same time, any research (from any knowledge domain) would lead to arbitrary outcomes if wrong/inappropriate methods administered. Therefore, such observation would become invalid.

**Observation 3: *“Anthropology is commonsense”***

This simple and sweet phrase of 'the other' reveals their constricted understanding. Probably, the ethnographies produced in anthropology made them feel so. But, such feeling comes only when they fail to get into the text. They may often get over the text and believe it so. Such group of scholars can understand the intensity of the text and its replicability only when they get into the text. Then they can realize the validity of the text which cannot be produced by

commonsensical understanding. However, they must realize that anthropology is not only producing ethnographies. There is lot more in the world of scholarship in this domain.

**Observation 4: “*It can never produce something useful (industry ready)*”**

The utilitarian value of things is very subjective. The theoretical and applied dimensions of anthropological knowledge have extreme significance. Anthropology contributes to every arena of human live and development. Anthropology makes contribution to understand better and solve the problems in education, healthcare, sanitation, livelihoods, entrepreneurship, management, disaster mitigation, conflict mitigation, poor and poverty, and so on. It depends on where are we focusing on and where are we looking for solutions and interventions. Therefore, the ‘industry ready’ idea is very perceptive. Overemphasis on a specific utilitarian value by a set of scholars dulls their perception to envision the other reality.

**Observation 5: “*Service department (part of it)*”**

Although the statement sounds awkward and discriminatory, the idea appears as shallow. The positive connotation of ‘service’ in this context is the ‘opportunity’ to serve everybody. The statement appears to have a lot of negative connotation for those who makes it, for the ‘anthropologist’, it is a positive idea. This must help us to reach out with the scientific trends, vigor and rigor of the discipline to those inculcated with biases due to ignorance.

**The problem:**

Ridiculing and reducing a stream of knowledge often lead to anger of those who practice it. But, the constant problem of denying an appropriate place to it by the “other” is a serious concern. One must examine into this issue from the ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ perspectives. The ‘etic’ is connected to and to an extent influenced by ‘emic’ although not necessarily. If such connections influence the perceptions of the other in a negative sense, it needs urgent introspection by anthropologists. It poses questions on research themes of anthropology, or our methods and results. We cannot so easily escape from this pertinent question.

In the scholarly context of India, the interaction with the ‘scholarly other’ in multi-disciplinary contexts is loaded with prejudice. Probably, it is the reflection of a hierarchical Indian society (probably any other society for that matter with a degree of social division or stratification). It often results in humiliation of the perceived low (or lesser significant). Probably, in Indian academics, anthropologists are the one among such ‘lowly’ creed. The humiliation generally

emerges from three processes: First, the type of knowledge our discipline (Social Anthropology) is part of; second, the knowledge it produces; third, the institutional settings, needs, compulsions and perspectives. But, the overarching element is the perceived position of each domain of knowledge in an imagined hierarchy.

### **Crisis within:**

Subsuming to sociological identity – are they really different? What a sociologist say? Speaking about it on the occasion of the superannuation Prof. R. Siva Prasad fits well to the time. His legendary teacher, Prof. Srinivas revered by Anthropologists and Sociologists as the person belonging to their discipline. Although, Prof. Srinivas believes that there is no difference between Sociology and Social Anthropology in India, he was probably not very successful in making others believe in such idea. Today, anthropology remains a discipline riddled with rival paradigms, ferocious disputes, and fleeting fashions. Few basic principles of theory and method are agreed upon and even the general nature of anthropological knowledge is continually being contested. Cumulative theory building is rare and difficult to sustain (Whitehouse 2009). Long ago, Anna Grimshaw and Keith Hart declared that “anthropology has been in crisis for as long as anyone can remember”. The contemporary challenge posed to anthropologists by their claim to know something special about human societies (Grimshaw and Hart 1994). The anthropologists must address such problems of knowledge production. Anthropologists must develop new method and theories and need to explore the new frontiers.

### **What can be done?**

As discussed in observations, there are several stereotypes about anthropology among the ‘scholarly other’. The perceived low is always at pressure to prove itself as valid time and again unlike those privileged other. The positive outcome of such pressures is the emergence of a continuously renewed and up-to-date domain in the knowledge system. However, the anthropologists must not succumb to those pressures. They must realize the reliability and validity of their domain. Anthropology, by nature is self-critical. But, anthropologists must not become over-critical of their work, in particular, on its validity, with the scholarly pressure from the other. Rather, one must realize the strengths of this knowledge and must communicate the same efficiently with every possible technique. One must also realize, the research and the results cannot be displayed at every moment to confront stereotypes. It needs a larger collaborative effort by the discipline and its practitioners. It must make the presence strongly felt in public. At the individual level, each one of us must attempt to help the other (within the

realm of anthropological knowledge) to understand and apply the knowledge that anthropology produces and believe in.

“I” (being an anthropology teacher) encounter and address a few challenges in everyday practice of it. What questions and conditions I face in day to day scholarly exercise is more important in this context. For example, the students in different contexts enters a classroom with the expectation of finding solution to various problems they think really bothering today. Although, their perceptions often misses a holistic understanding, they often sound hurry to find answers. My attempt in this context would be to answer ‘what are those facts (rather social facts in Durkheim’s analysis) they look for?’ or make them understand that every material dimension has a hidden social fact within it. Very often, an anthropologist come across array of such questions in interdisciplinary institutional settings where the stakeholders expect very objective answers (as they perceive).

The case of dealing with power relations and imagined hierarchies is totally different. It is wise to ignore as they are filled with biases. If not, it consumes the time and energy of an anthropologist. It is essential to question, how much political and/or power relations with which anthropology can engage? What is the outcome (often in material sense)? We must tap the full potential of the discipline and realize the ‘scholarly self’ to burst the myths and stereotypes. In the process, the ‘scholarly other’ may understand or may fail to realize. We must treat it as a process but not an end in it. However, no engagement with public/in public life as a scholar seems to be a larger problem. But, many anthropological associations and institutions, in specific, American Anthropology Association initiated rigorous Public Anthropology debates. The attempt will definitely reinvigorate the position of anthropology.

## References

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