

The Human Body and the National Body in Post-Independence Twentieth Century India: A Brief History of the All-India Anthropometric Survey (AIAS)

None can tell, at whose beckoning, vast waves of humanity
In currents unstoppable, from the unknown here arrived,
To merge into the Great Sea!
Here Aryans, non-Aryans, Dravidians, Chinese
Sakas, Hunas, Pathans, Moguls in one body, lo, were united.
...
Come, O Aryans, come, non-Aryans, Hindus and Mussulmans—
Come today, O Englishmen, come, oh come, Christians!
Come, O Brahmin, cleansing your mind
Join hands with all—
Come, O Downtrodden, let the burden
Of every insult, be forever dispelled.

Rabindranath Tagore in *Bharat Tirtha*, 2 July 1910 translated by Monish R. Chatterjee (1991)

In 1910, when Rabindranath Tagore wrote *BharatTirtha*, he implored all Brahmins to “cleanse their minds” and “join hands with all”.¹ Corollarily, he also implored the downtrodden to forget the historical burden of insults and join the mass.² In Tagore’s poem, this was the ideal utopian culmination of the history of the Nation—one body and one soul which has absorbed unto itself since nobody knows when, people from across the world- Aryans and Non-Aryans, Dravidians and Chinese, Shakas, Hunas, Pathans and Moguls.³ The necessary price to pay for the assimilation thus was to be a negation of history and its burden. The metaphor of one body became Tagore’s expression of this dream— an alchemical perfection of varied elements. In some ways, B.R. Ambedkar, the strongest critic of caste oppression in Indian history and the foremost symbol of the radical rejection of caste hierarchy, might have agreed with Tagore,

¹ Tagore, *Bharat Tirtha*.

² Tagore, *Bharat Tirtha*.

³ Tagore, *Bharat Tirtha*.

minus the utopian excess of its assimilationist dream. In his 1916 essay— “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development”, Ambedkar commented, “The peoples of India form a homogeneous whole. The various races of India occupying definite territories have more or less fused into one another and do possess cultural unity, which is the only criterion of a homogeneous population . . .”⁴. But, for Ambedkar, there is a seething fissure to account for, in this homogeneity. For Ambedkar, caste in India entails an “artificial chopping off of the [homogenous] population into fixed and definite units” by marriage rules.⁵ These marriage rules are shaped by imaginations of purity and pollution hinged on idioms of heredity. Notably, both Tagore and Ambedkar used words such as “mingle and mingled”⁶ or “fuse”⁷ while addressing a structure that resists the imaginations of assimilation that these words evoke. My project is placed at this uneasy point of the imagination of caste in the body politic of the nation.

I will read three interrelated sources— the Bulletin of the first summer school of the Anthropological Survey of India (hereafter AnSI) held in 1961; a paper presented in that summer school by H.K. Rakshit, later at the helm of the All India Anthropometric Survey (AIAS) respectively; and the Karnataka state report of the first phase of the All India Anthropometric Survey. The very point of entry in these archival sources, that is, the minutes of the inauguration of the Summer School of Anthropology cogently lays out the premises of this paper— On May 28, 1961, Dr. A Lakshmanaswami Mudaliar, then the Vice-Chancellor of the Madras university, having not been well, opened the Conference Hall of his residence in Kodaikanal to a group of Anthropologists for the inauguration of the first Summer School of Anthropology in India.⁸ The Director of the Anthropological Survey of India outlined the purpose of the Seminar and the major problems that the members of the summer school would explore. The summer school was being held under the auspices of the Ministry of Scientific Research and Cultural Affairs. Mudaliar welcomed the participants to Kodaikanal-

He hoped that the young scientists would spend some amount of their time hiking in this country and would come in contact with the villagers in the neighborhood. They would then be able to see how some of these tribal communities lived. He also invited them to see a small

⁴ B.R. Ambedkar. “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development”, 3.

⁵ B.R. Ambedkar. “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development”, 3.

⁶ Tagore, *Bharat Tirtha*.

⁷ B.R. Ambedkar. “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development”, 7.

⁸ Bulletin of the Anthropological Survey of India, Vol X, No. 2, July 1961.

local museum started by Jesuit missionaries in which there was a precious collection of prehistoric objects belonging to the ancient inhabitants of Kodaikanal⁹.

This small snippet of the Minutes of the inauguration ceremony can take us into the space in which the summer school is set- multiple times, and multiple ways of inhabiting the same space. At the helm of this civilizational timeline, the anthropologist situated themselves far ahead of the “tribal communities”, and even farther ahead of the archaeological objects, even while all these animate and non-animate actors occupied the same space. This “heterotopic” and “heterochronic” space forms the premise of this essay. In 1967, Michel Foucault thus spoke in a lecture-

The great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history: with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis, and cycle, themes of the ever- past . . . The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed.¹⁰

This heterochrony necessitated the imagination of what Foucault conceptualized as the “heterotopia”— a “simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live”¹¹, and the heterotopia necessarily relied for its shape on its “heterochrony” —

“the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place . . .”¹²

Caste, we will see, as we read our sources further, provided the organizing scaffolding in this heterotopic heterochrony of the postcolonial nation state. Thus, to summarize the objectives of this paper, I would investigate Caste Science in the AIAS to argue that AIAS takes the body of the individual to be the site of its imaginations of the postcolonial nation state. The bodies of the individuals are arranged along a teleological timeline of modernity even as they occupy the same physical time and space to express the historicity and futurity of the nation. In a pervasive manner then, the anthropologists move towards a futurity of Tagore’s assimilationist dream of a singular historical consciousness while reinforcing the artificial boundaries that both Tagore and Ambedkar critique, each in their own way.

⁹ Bulletin of the Anthropological Survey of India, Vol X, No. 2, July 1961.

¹⁰ Foucault, *Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias*. 1.

¹¹ Foucault, *Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias*, 1.

¹² Foucault, *Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias*, 1.