



## REVIEW ARTICLES

# Agenda for a Publicly Engaged Anthropology: Some Reflections<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the historical development and contemporary significance of anthropology, tracing its origin back to the 19th century. It also discusses the beginning and integration of Public Anthropology into the core discipline. The paper explains how anthropology has utilised more scientific and technological methods as Molecular Anthropology and Artificial Intelligence to delve deeper into our understanding of societies and cultures. Public Anthropology, as introduced by Robert Borofsky, is regarded as a significant sub-domain of anthropology, enhancing anthropological insights, and promoting social justice, equality and human rights by enlisting the participation of the public.

The paper further investigates the works of renowned anthropologists like Franz Boas, Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, who are prominent contributors to public discussions concerning cultural diversity and human behaviour. It also discusses the present-day challenges that anthropology faces in upholding public visibility, often blurred by the use of obscure vocabulary and complex scholarly style. Further, the division between Public Anthropology and Applied Anthropology has been expanded, with the former laying more emphasis on the use of media and social platforms to raise public debate and awareness.

Indian anthropologists like Nirmal Kumar Bose and Prabodh Kumar Bhowmick have been appreciated for their continuous commitment and scholarly efforts to empower and improve the social conditions of marginalised groups. The paper beckons anthropologists to carefully handle

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their academic pursuits with their social responsibilities maintaining the ethical requirements and simultaneously steering societal change. It talks about the fluidity of disciplinary boundaries and the use of digital platforms to circulate knowledge, thereby speeding up or rather catalysing social and political transformation.

To conclude, the paper stresses the necessity for anthropologists to engage in ethical and responsible public discourses, using their subject matter expertise to deal with glaring and prominent societal issues and simultaneously contribute to finding solutions to global problems. Public Anthropology is regarded as a key factor in making anthropology relevant and effective in present-day society.

With its long trajectory of more than four centuries, Anthropology has taken many different twists to cater to the varied scientific interests of its practitioners who were either explorers or natural scientists, medical doctors, jurors, missionaries, or traders. But a single broad focus was conspicuous in all their contributions, and that was to record and comprehend human biological and cultural variations across time and space. It was not until the late 19th century that Anthropology finally became a separate academic discipline in American and Western European universities. Since then, Anthropology has not looked back. New research agendas have been brought into its fold when time moved on. Now it is not difficult to realise that Anthropology has taken the shape of an integrated science with many ramifications, incorporating advanced Molecular Anthropology in Biological Anthropology; machine learning and Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Prehistoric Anthropology; language ideologies, linguistic racism, linguistic revitalisation, and verbal art in Linguistic Anthropology; the proliferation of symbolic and structural modes of analysis, and the development of the ethnography of communication, etc. in Socio-Cultural Anthropology. New sub-fields in Anthropology are so many that it is difficult to prepare a complete inventory.

While anthropologists immerse themselves in the study and comprehension of vastly diverse human societies and cultures all over the world through extensive ethnographic fieldwork, Anthropology, unfortunately, is often absent from many public debates today. Our subject has become so specialised, and our academic jargon so abundant, that our recent writings might not resonate in local or national newspapers and popular magazines, as was common with the works of legendary anthropologists like Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, and Ruth Benedict. Rarely are we now invited to or do we participate in public

discussions through print or electronic media, let alone in policy formulations. Are we hesitant to engage, or are we engrossed in our research to the point of neglecting public involvement? Observing this scenario, Thomas Hylland Eriksen takes a candid look at why Anthropology has not garnered the recognition and respect it deserves as a scientific discipline. He remarks, "Anthropologists possess an extensive amount of knowledge about human lives, and most are profoundly knowledgeable about what sets people apart and what unites us. Yet, there appears to be a reluctance within our profession to share this knowledge with a wider readership. The task of translating across cultures is integral to our work; however, translating for the benefit of readers outside our discipline seems less pressing. Anthropological articles and monographs tend to be dense, specialised, and, quite frankly, dull. Frequently, they get bogged down in details, allowing the larger picture to fade from view" (Eriksen, 2020: Preface). A critical look at Eriksen's frustrations and resentments had motivated many in the past to undertake reflexive exercises in evaluating the pitfalls that Anthropology encounters today to look at it as less popular than other social sciences.

At this juncture, I question why should Anthropology be visible in the public sphere, or to put it differently, why should Anthropology be publicly engaging. This particular orientation in Anthropology, of late, is termed 'Public Anthropology' and is now taught in many Universities worldwide. It largely endorses a conceptual framework for engaging Anthropology with critical social issues. "Labelled as Public Interest Anthropology (PIA), the approach merges problem-solving with theory development and analysis in the interest of change motivated by a commitment to social justice, racial harmony, equality, human rights and well-being. The concern with change means translating the anthropological point of view for public consumption in the public sphere of debate."

Robert Borofsky from the Hawaii Pacific University of the USA coined the term 'Public Anthropology' in the late 1990s. Borofsky and DeLauri contend that "Public anthropology emphasises the anthropologist's role as an engaged intellectual. It continues anthropology's commitment to being an ethnographic witness, to describing, in human terms how life is lived beyond the borders of many readers' experiences. But it also adds a commitment, through ethnography, to reframing the terms of public debates – transforming received, accepted understandings of social issues with new insights, new framings – and fostering social and political change that benefits others, especially those anthropologists work with" (2019: 6).

Among various other definitions, Carole McGranahan conceptualises Public Anthropology as "... socially relevant, theoretically informed, and politically engaged ethnographic scholarship" (2006: 256). Books like Edward Hecican's *Public Anthropology: Engaging Social Issues in the Modern World* (2016) and Sam Beck and Carl Maida's *Public Anthropology in a Borderless World* (2017) have broadened the scope of Public Anthropology and consolidated its position today as a credible sub-field of Anthropology. It is now understood as a publicly engaged subject encompassing intellectual and ethical concerns; a nexus between anthropological knowledge and governance issues, public discourse, livelihoods, civil society, and more; and an anthropology that appeals to a broader audience. Anthropology in the public arena, therefore, possesses both academic and applied dimensions. While maintaining our engaged scholarship, ethnographic research methodology, and ethical standards, Public Anthropology seeks to grasp human suffering and misery in exquisite detail.

Although Robert Borofsky introduced the term "Public Anthropology" in the late 1990s, it doesn't imply that the pioneers of Anthropology were unconcerned with the subject's public face. McGranahan notes, "Engaged scholarship is not new in anthropology. The discipline has a long history of interventionist work, including Franz Boas' efforts to change discriminatory ideas on race, Margaret Mead's efforts to influence social and educational policy, Sol Tax's action anthropology in the 1940s and 1950s, and more recently, subfields like applied and practising anthropology. A less commendable lineage would involve anthropology's complicity with colonial and other state endeavours, including recent ones, to classify and control populations. Just like some of these predecessors, public anthropology seeks to effect change based on ethnographic findings. It responds to specific contexts, collaborates with relevant communities, and acknowledges the inherent challenges tied to authority, privilege, and representation" (McGranahan, 2006: 256-57).

Robert Borofsky offers examples of how late 19th and early 20th-century anthropological writings had significant resonance in public engagement. He writes, "James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*, and Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* engaged a wide range of readers outside academia in stimulating and impactful ways during the first half of the 20th century. In the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s, anthropologists often played prominent roles in the public domain. For instance, in May 1936, Franz Boas appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, which referred to Boas' *The Mind of Primitive Man* as the 'Magna Carta of self-respect' for non-Western peoples. Margaret Mead was a cultural icon. Throughout the 1950s, she was the most

widely known and respected anthropologist globally. Upon her death in 1978, tributes poured in not only from the President of the United States but also from the Secretary-General of the United Nations. In 1979, she was posthumously bestowed the United States' highest civilian honour, the Presidential Medal of Freedom" (Borofsky 2020).

Early anthropologists in the USA had initiated the process of establishing Anthropology as a publicly engaged profession. To cite a few examples, Borofsky writes, "Anthropologists played a role in the Civil Rights Movement [in the USA]. Before World War II, Franz Boas and Margaret Mead emphasised that changing social environments could lead to significant behavioural changes. In 1939, Hortense Powdermaker wrote an insightful ethnography of Black life in Mississippi that dealt with economic and political barriers that limited Black success" (<http://www.publicanthropology.org/>).

Making Anthropology publicly engaged was not a low priority in Europe either. For example, Borofsky and DeLauri write, "In Britain Bronislaw Malinowski's books on the Trobrianders reached a wide public audience as did his 1930s BBC talks on science and religion. He was the academic mentor to Jomo Kenyatta, an anti-colonial activist – even while at LSE – who became Kenya's first president. ... Fredrik Barth did ethnographic studies in eight distinct sites aimed at facilitating broader understandings of how people operated in their decision-making and, because of such work, was honoured with a special Norwegian state scholarship. He also engaged in applied anthropology in Iran (for UNESCO) and Sudan (Darfur, for FAO). He became a public presence in Norway and beyond writing numerous newspaper articles, participating in a range of interviews, and having various programs about him" (2019: 5).

Although the anthropological writings or public speeches of all these pioneers had a flair for activism, none of them was an activist *per se*. It is widely accepted that although Boas, Mead, and Powdermaker did the background exercise in developing the intellectual framework for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in the USA, they were not duly acknowledged as they were not directly involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Anthropologists were shy in making their public presence even though their rich ethnographies were essentially the narratives of public misery and social evils. However, these anthropologists sought to dispel popular misconceptions about other cultures, which at that time was a departure from conventional intellectual thinking. "Boas's ground-breaking work on race debunked prevailing notions of racial superiority, while Malinowski's ethnographic studies provided valuable insights into the social and cultural dynamics of non-Western societies. These

pioneering anthropologists laid the foundation for a more socially engaged and publicly oriented anthropology” ([https://anthroholi.com/public-anthropology#google\\_vignette](https://anthroholi.com/public-anthropology#google_vignette)).

At this juncture, let us shift our attention to the early days of Indian Anthropology and anthropologists and their contributions to Public Anthropology. I would like to present the examples of two distinguished anthropologists whose exemplary contributions have had far-reaching effects on contemporary society and can be classified as instances of what we now call Public Anthropology. While I have learned about one of them, I have had the privilege of observing the other closely. The individual I could not meet but have read about extensively is Prof. Nirmal Kumar Bose. Many of us are familiar with Nirmal Kumar Bose (1901-72), an astute anthropologist who served as the Director of the Anthropological Survey of India from 1959 to 1964. His role in promoting the public presence of Anthropology in India was substantial, as he had a profound grasp of the political and cultural dimensions of Indian society and its aspirations. During the First N.K. Bose Memorial Lecture organised by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi, Prof. Surajit Sinha remarked, “In 1930, Nirmal Bose joined the *Salt Satyagraha*<sup>2</sup> movement initiated by Mahatma Gandhi. Alongside a few well-wishers and friends like Hangsheswar Roy and Bhagat of Bolpur, Bose established a Khadi Sangha in a settlement of the then ‘untouchable castes’. Bose was arrested in 1931 for participating in the Salt Satyagraha and was incarcerated as a ‘C’ class prisoner, initially in Suri jail and subsequently transferred to Dum Dum special jail” (Sinha, 1997: 12). He was both an anthropologist and a public figure genuinely invested in India’s independence struggle and the struggles of marginalised sections of the Indian population for the greater good of the nation. Bose’s engagement with tribes and those on the fringes of society was evident in his writings and the initiatives he spearheaded as the Director of the Anthropological Survey of India. Bose’s contribution to Indian anthropology aligns well with the characteristics of Public Anthropology, as articulated in the statement, “Public anthropology emphasises the anthropologist’s role as an engaged intellectual. It continues anthropology’s commitment to being an ethnographic witness, describing human life beyond the experiences of many readers. However, it also commits to reframing public debates—challenging accepted understandings of social issues with fresh insights and perspectives— and fostering social and political change for the betterment of others, particularly those anthropologists work with” (Borofsky & De Lauri, 2019: 6). I am delighted that two of our distinguished colleagues, namely Prof.



P.C. Joshi and Prof. P. Venkata Rao have already delivered the 12th and the 13th Nirmal Kumar Bose Memorial Lecture at the prestigious Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, and its organiser is none other than one of our worthy students, Prof. K. Anil Kumar, who is currently heading the Janapada Sampada Division of the IGNCA.

The other Indian anthropologist, whom many of us may have encountered and interacted with, is Prof. Prabodh Kumar Bhowmick (1926-2003). He is well-known among anthropologists, government officials, and NGOs for his action-based anthropological initiative known as the Bidisha experiment. From his early days, Prof. Bhowmick was dedicated to the nation, with a strong sense of patriotism. Soni and Soni point out, “Prof. Bhowmick was a simple man with nationalist ideals and actions. When he was around 13-14 years old, he participated in the ‘Quit India’<sup>3</sup> and ‘Swadeshi’<sup>4</sup> movements during 1942 and was imprisoned for two and a half years. He even took his matriculation examination while in jail in 1945” (Soni and Soni 2021: 143). Prof. Prabodh Kumar Bhowmick earned his Ph.D. from Calcutta University in 1960 for his thesis on the socio-economic life of the Lodhas of West Bengal. After completing his PhD, he chose to continue studying the Lodha community, which had been classified as a ‘Criminal Tribe’ under the oppressive ‘Criminal Tribes Act, of 1871’ during British colonial rule. These communities were later de-notified by the Independent Indian government on August 31, 1952. Prof. Bhowmick had a deep affinity for the Lodha community of West Bengal due to the discrimination they faced from both the public and the police. Prof. S.N. Ratha, a close associate of Prof. Bhowmick, recalls that Bhowmick’s ethnographic research revealed that “... about a third of the population in the Midnapur district were accused of crimes such as dacoity, burglary, pilferage, theft, etc. Many of them were serving prison sentences, leaving their children destitute on the streets... Bhowmick aimed to redirect the Lodha away from criminal activities, engaging them while they were young and instilling social values in a residential school” (Ratha, 1991: 6-7). In a recent blog, Prof Samita Manna, the daughter of Prof. Bhowmick has written, “His commitment to Lodha cause and intimate relation he developed with them that he was nicknamed Lodha Bhowmick. Children from the community addressed him as *jaatha babu* (Father’s Elder Brother or *Tau* in Hindi)” (<https://www.anthropologyindiaforum.org/post/legacy-of-a-legendary-field-anthropologist>). His involvement with the community and steering its overall change so exemplary that Prof. Vijay Sahay (2003) termed him the “Messiah of the Lodhas”.

Motivated by his mentor, Prof. Nirmal Kumar Bose, Prof. Bhowmick established the Samaj Sevak Sangh and subsequently the Institute for Social Research and Applied Anthropology in the small village of Bagabhera, near Narayangarh Police Station in West Midnapur district, primarily for the benefit of the Lodha community. He named this place 'Bidisha' and dedicated his life to elevating the living standards of the Lodha and integrating them into mainstream society. His daughter writes that Sol Tax was so impressed by the Bidisha experiment of Prof. Bhowmick that he termed it a 'social laboratory'. I had the privilege of visiting Bidisha several times during the annual conventions organised by Prof. Bhowmick, when he was alive, which brought together anthropologists and social workers from different corners of India to exchange ideas about the development of indigenous communities. Instances like Alan Holmberg's study of the Siriano of Bolivia, Sol Tax and his students' study of the Fox Indians, and Bhowmick's study of the Lodha showcase the same genre—primarily participatory intervention consciously conducted by anthropologists, which we now refer to as Public Anthropology.

It will not be out of place if I mention similar works in other corners of India. Way back in 1976, a landmark project with the name the Yanadi Action Research Project (YARP) was undertaken by Prof. B.C.Agrawal, Prof. Sudhakar Rao and Prof. P.C. Gurivi Reddy in Andhra Pradesh to study the Yanadi culture, and suggest long-term and short-term measures to bring about desirable changes among the Yanadi under the auspices of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). Had the term Public Anthropology been in vogue at that time, the study would have certainly come under this genre.

At this juncture, you might ask what is then the difference between Applied Anthropology and Public Anthropology. The subtle difference is clear when we read the objectives of the Society of Applied Anthropology, which was formally established in 1941. It proffers that Applied Anthropology is "to promote the investigation of the principles of human behaviour and the application of these principles to contemporary issues and problems." It further states "Applied Anthropology is designed not only for scientists, but even more for those concerned with putting plans into operation, administrators, psychiatrists, social workers, and all those who as part of their responsibility have to take action on problems of human relations." But Borofsky contends that the best way to differentiate Applied and Public Anthropology may not be their contents, but the contexts in which they developed. He adds, "Applied anthropology has its roots in late nineteenth century American and British



colonialism. The focus was on understanding how various indigenous groups lived in order to govern them more effectively.”

The context apart, I presume that Applied Anthropology is essentially the application of anthropological theories and methods to understand and solve contemporary social problems.<sup>5</sup> There are instances where indigenous or tribal communities become active participants in applied anthropological research collaborating with anthropologists for the community good. Prof. Bhowmick’s establishment of Samaj Sevak Sangh with active participation of the Lodha of West Midnapore district of West Bengal and solving their day-to-day predicaments like education, health, social discrimination and employment. Public Anthropology also engages with communities and involves the public in their work as much as Applied Anthropology does for empowering vulnerable communities. However, the latter goes further in involving the media and social network platforms, newspapers, popular magazines, etc. to create public awareness, debate and discussion on issues of critical importance. Blogs and digital journals are used to spread the message to a wider audience and make the debates more participatory for the larger benefit of the community. Sometimes Public Anthropology confronts the hegemonic structures that stand in the way of effectively addressing subtle social problems. Maida stretches its scope further by including advocacy, action, activism and participation. He emphasises a dialogic approach to produce texts, generate mutual learning and become instrumental in creating change (Beck & Maida, 2017)

Eriksen (2006) provides us with a fascinating and revealing account of the relationship between Scandinavian anthropology and the public. In some important ways, Scandinavian anthropologists are public anthropologists by their participation in public discourse. This resulted from the integration of the discipline within the functions of the state, a result of nation-state formation, development and identity creation.

In summary, I may add that Public Anthropology has the following characteristics: (1) it encompasses knowledge production by professional anthropologists, which is intended to reach beyond disciplinary boundaries, and usually beyond the academy, in ways that differ from applied anthropology or practicing anthropology, (2) it is not about filtering and simplifying academic work, but rather aims to translate complicated ideas into widely intelligible and engaging languages, preferably in the vernacular. The genre of public anthropological writing is largely non-academic and jargon-free as much as practicable, and (3) it prefers to use local media and a large variety of digital platforms for the dissemination of participatory knowledge, the examples being public lectures, articles, podcasts, and exhibitions, etc.

By and large, public anthropologists play three major roles: (1) the role of educators and communicators, (2) the role of advocates of social justice and empowerment in marginal and less privileged communities for fostering positive changes, and (3) the role of partners in community-based projects to ensure public awareness and sustainability of development projects. However, the challenges are diverse for a public anthropologist. She/he has to balance her/his academic rigour with public engagement, be conscious of the ethical implications of the work undertaken, and dispassionately assess the impact of her/his work in public engagement.

The current global crises have issued a resounding call to all anthropologists worldwide to become engaged, ethically responsible, and accountable in safeguarding the planet from catastrophe. The imperative of the moment demands that anthropologists transcend disciplinary confines, address broader issues for the public good, and actively participate in broader public discourse to effect societal changes. If necessary, we must express our robust dissent against obstructive institutional structures and hegemonic paradigms that hinder our public engagement. Our meaningful participation, involving sharing our engaged and ethically grounded ethnographic insights in the media and social platforms, is crucial—no matter how daunting it may seem.

Let me conclude by citing an excerpt from the visionary writings of one of our contemporaries, an anthropologist, a philanthropist, a teacher and an activist, Dr. Naresh Vaid, whom I call an ‘emancipated thinker’. He aptly writes, “With a strong knowledge of thousands of communities, particularly tribals, anthropologists can be of great help in bringing social change, social reform, environment protection and up to national integration, the list is endless. For this, the only requisite is that anthropologists speak in one voice, spread their message in all corners of the world through their writings and social media, and generate interest of the ‘common man’ about the issues that impact his survival” (2021:135).

## Notes

1. Delivered as a Special Lecture at the National Seminar, “Anthropology of Development and Sustainability”, organised by the Department of Anthropology, University of Hyderabad, on 9-10 February 2024. An earlier expanded version of this paper was presented as a keynote address at the UIAF-World Anthropology Congress held at Bhubaneswar on 9 August 2023. For the full keynote address visit <https://www.anthropologyindiaforum.org/post/anthropology-in-the-public-sphere-indigeneity-social-justice-sustainability-and-global-peace>.

2. Salt Satyagraha or Salt March, Dandi March, or Dandi Satyagraha was one of the major non-violent protests in pre-Independence India against the British colonial policy of government's salt monopoly and imposition of taxes on salt procurement from sea. It was led by Mahatma Gandhi. It started on 12th March 1930 and ended on 6th April 1930. As the March started it only had 80 people, but as it grew stronger with 50,000 protestors, it became a historical protest in the Indian History and a huge step in the freedom struggle of India.
3. In 1942 the Indian National Congress led by Mahatma Gandhi launched Quit India movement against the British on 8<sup>th</sup> August. The slogan of the movement was 'Quit India' or 'Bharat Chodo'.
4. *Swadeshi* movement, officially launched in 1905 after the partition of Bengal refers to a comprehensive movement that sought to oppose the British rule in India and to encourage self-help, use of home-grown goods, national education and use of Indian languages. This movement boycotted all British goods and institutions in India.
5. Anthropology can be used to solve problems in an enormous variety of fields. Here are some common examples: health and medicine, business, human rights, education, environment issues, community development, museums, disaster research and management, international development, etc.

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