

# Pranab Ganguly: A Generalist by Option<sup>1</sup>



ABHIJIT GUHA<sup>†</sup>

*Department of Anthropology,  
Vidyasagar University, Midnapore,  
West Bengal – 721102, India.*

&

*Institute of Development Studies,  
7/D, DD Block, Sector 1,  
Salt Lake, Kolkata – 700064, India.*

E-mail: abhijitguhavuanthro@rediffmail.com

**KEYWORDS:** Pranab Ganguly. Indian Anthropology. Bio-cultural Anthropology. Human Adaptation. Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Anthropological Survey of India. Vidyasagar University.

**ABSTRACT:** Pranab Kumar Ganguly was a leading bio-cultural anthropologist of India who passed away peacefully on February 15, 2014 at his Kolkata residence. Apart from his contributions in the typical subfields of Biological/Physical Anthropology, like anthropometry, dermatoglyphics and dental anthropology, Ganguly made important contributions in social demography, ethno-history, material culture, language, religion and political system. Moreover, he also contributed on some policy issues of the Onges of Little Andaman. Ganguly received his M.Sc., Ph.D and D.Sc. degrees from the University of Calcutta in 1951, 1966 and 1973 respectively. He joined the Anthropological Survey of India as an Anthropologist in 1969 and became its Deputy Director and subsequently founded two new Anthropology Departments in India at Manipur and Vidyasagar Universities as founder Professor. He retired from Vidyasagar University, West Bengal in 1993; the extension of his service up to five year was discontinued by the then Vidyasagar University executive council for reasons best known to them. Ganguly was the elected President of the

<sup>†</sup> Former Professor and Senior Fellow, Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR)

Anthropology and Archeology Section of the Indian Science Congress during 1976–77. Ganguly received four prestigious medals namely, the Bertillon Medal of France (1973), Sir Asutosh Mookerjee Gold medal (1975), Bengal Immunity Research Prize and Gold Medal (1975) as well as the Griffith Memorial Prize (1975) for his research on a variety of topics in Anthropology. In this paper I have made an attempt to portray Ganguly not only as a complete anthropologist but also as a human being covering his notable contributions, which included his attention to the application of anthropology for human well being as well as an ethnographic travel account of Poland.

*We must learn from the past experience; hindsight, I believe, is much easier than foresight.*

----- Pranab Ganguly (1977).

## INTRODUCTION

I had the unique opportunity to listen to a conversation between Pranab Kumar Ganguly and Bhupesh Chandra Mukherjee, the first Vice-Chancellor of Vidyasagar University sometime in the year 1986 in the administrative building of the university. Our Vice-Chancellor, who happened to be a man of history, asked Pranab Ganguly ‘What is your specialisation in Anthropology?’ Ganguly smiled and answered in a polite manner: ‘Sir, I am a generalist by option’! The Vice-Chancellor remained silent and his face did not seem to be appreciative. At that time, I could not digest the answer given by Ganguly since we all knew that Pranab Ganguly was a Physical/Biological anthropologist.<sup>1</sup> But why did he reply in such a manner? Moreover, I did not like his response since I thought that such a reply from a senior professor of our department in the public showed that our subject was not mature enough to become specialised and hence a weak discipline in its infancy!

It took years for me to realise how Pranab Ganguly viewed and practiced anthropology in his own life, until I could collect and read some of his works in the different subfields of anthropology. In this paper, I will narrate the results of my reading of some of his published writings, which I believe have immense contemporary relevance. But before this recounting, I would like to share with you some of my personal experiences of working with Pranab Ganguly in building up the small Department of Anthropology at Vidyasagar University during the late 1980s in Medinipur.

## ANECDOTES

### I

Let me first narrate an anecdote. I joined the department in 1985, three months before Ganguly came in and reported him about the nomenclature of our department, which caused confusion in my mind. At the inception, our department was named ‘Social Anthropology with Tribal Culture’ under the Faculty of Arts and Commerce, although its printed syllabus contained courses on Physical Anthropology and Prehistory!<sup>2</sup> Ganguly was not also happy with the situation but he too was at a loss and only told me to wait patiently until time came to change the nomenclature as well as the faculty affiliation of the subject, which put it under the Arts Faculty. Furthermore, all these were done by a group of experts led by Professor Probodh Kumar Bhowmick belonging to the University of Calcutta long before we joined Vidyasagar University. Gradually, under the able leadership of Ganguly, we could convince the university authority that the name of the department should be only ‘Anthropology’ and be placed under the Faculty of Science. The University Grants Commission also designated our discipline as ‘Anthropology’. Our proposal was formally accepted through the recommendations by a large expert committee constituted by the then Vice-Chancellor in 1987. But some of the politically ‘influential’ professors who were at the helm of affairs were not ready to sacrifice the phrase ‘Tribal Culture’, which they argued should be the *sine qua non* of this department located in a tribal area. One of those ‘influential’ professors belonged to the department

of Applied Mathematics. I could still remember how Ganguly in a public meeting challenged the said professor by saying: 'Would you call any Department of Mathematics as Mathematics with Algebra'? The professor grinned and said: 'It would be a truism to insert Algebra after the name of Mathematics, because there cannot be any Mathematics without Algebra!' Ganguly seemed to wait for this answer and replied promptly: 'The same is true of Anthropology. There cannot be any Anthropology without the study of tribals'!

## II

My account on Pranab Ganguly will be incomplete if I do not write down his administrative acumen in running the small and budding department of Anthropology at Vidyasagar University. He believed in team work and had the unique capability to inspire his colleagues. As Head of the Department whenever he had to take leave he used to inform us about the reason for taking leave except in cases of confidential purposes, like attending selection committee meetings or taking examinations at other universities. Before leaving the department he used to say to each of us individually 'Hold the fort with responsibility because you are playing an important role!' On one occasion when all of us met for an *adda*<sup>3</sup> we discovered that Ganguly told the same thing to each one of us almost in the same language! So, one day I asked Ganguly 'Why did you say each one of us the same thing separately?' He smiled and answered 'If I said the same to you collectively, then there would be a diffusion of responsibility which might have led to a relaxed attitude in all of you!'

## III

I now narrate the third anecdote. In the initial years at Vidyasagar University, under the UGC mandate we had to run an one year Bridge Course in Anthropology to prepare our students for the M.Sc. course since at that time there was no college affiliated to the university which had honours course in Anthropology. After running the course for 2-3 years Ganguly introduced a 'Preparatory English' class to improve the skills of our students in the foreign language by inviting a Professor of the English Department. As regards admission of students, who

used to come from the pass course he debated at length with the officers of the university to introduce the calculation of their overall average marks or life average, starting from the school level along with the marks obtained by them at the graduate examination. On the contrary, the university authority strongly opined to consider only the marks at the graduate level for admission to Bridge Course. Ganguly owing to his personality had won the case but he was not satisfied. He suggested me to compile a register of all the students with their bio-note and advised me to wait for two years till the publication of the results of these Bridge course passed students at the M.Sc. Part I level.<sup>4</sup> When time came he again told me to make two sets of simple Pearson correlation (I was then teaching Basic Statistics) between the averages of M.Sc. Part I result and life average of the students as well as with the averages of their B.Sc. pass course result. The students also found great interest in doing the exercise for their statistics course. The results were spectacular. In simple terms almost invariably the students who had higher life averages scored high than students who had high scores only at the graduate examination. The results of our correlation were shown to the university authorities and it seemed that they could not imagine this sort of exercise by any academic department! Ganguly was very happy and I continued this exercise for some more years with almost same results. Professor Pranab Ganguly was always cool but accurate.<sup>5</sup> He believed that science cannot be practiced without coolness and precision.<sup>6</sup> He was critical of those anthropologists who made their arguments unnecessarily complicated and could not clearly state what they meant to say.

## ACADEMICS

I begin this section with a profile of the intellectual architecture of Pranab Ganguly. In his external appearance he was unlike the classical post-colonial Bengali intellectual who used to be a thin, short, sickly, bearded and underfed human being carrying a bag made of cotton and speaking in a nasal voice and believed in some form of leftist ideology.<sup>7</sup> Ganguly was just the antonym of the typical Bengali intellectual. He was a tall, robust, clean-shaved, healthy man who had a heavy voice and did not believe in any kind of leftism. His most favourite scientist

was R. A. Fisher and he often discussed with me about Fisher's famous book *The design of experiments* (1935) in which the great statistician and biologist explained scientific experiments with the help of simple day-to-day activities of ordinary people; a housewife tasting infusion of tea mixed with milk, for example. Ganguly's Indian idol was Dr. B. S. Guha whom he regarded as one of the great anthropologists of India for his precise thought and stylistic personal life.

Ganguly advised me to read the book of Fisher and the tea making example when I was assigned to teach research methodology to post-graduate students in anthropology. Much later, when I read Ganguly's papers on secular trends of stature and relations between somatic variability and socio-economic status could I realise his advice on the reading of Fisher's design of experiments. Ganguly was not a typical Bengali *adda*-talker but a practitioner of what he preached and he was also unlike the romanticized dinner party anthropologist described by the British anthropologist Robin Fox in his challenging book *Encounter with anthropology* (1973).

*Material culture, religion, life-cycle rites, political organisation and ethno-history*

Under this background, I would begin with Ganguly's contributions (some of them were written jointly with another meticulous anthropologist, Anadi Pal who was also known as a Physical anthropologist) on various topics of social-cultural anthropology apart from his contributions in the typical fields of Biological/Physical Anthropology, like anthropometry, dermatoglyphics, human genetics and dental anthropology (Ganguly, '60; Ganguly and Pal '61, '63b, '74; Ganguly and Mukherjee, '64; Dutta and Ganguly, '65; Ganguly, '73a, '76, '78 and '79; Chaudhuri and Ganguly, '83). I have chosen this route to show that how difficult it is to categorise an anthropologist like Pranab Ganguly under anyone of the subfields of anthropology. In fact it may be an injustice to classify Ganguly as a 'Physical or Biological Anthropologist'. It is really sad that his solid papers in prestigious national and international peer-reviewed journals on religion, material culture, life-cycle rites and judicial system of the tribes in Andaman and Nicobar Islands during 1961-63 did not receive comprehensive treatment

by the social and cultural anthropologists in India till today.

I would therefore, begin with one of his early papers on the religious beliefs among the Onges of Little Andaman. This paper entitled 'Religious beliefs of the Negritos of Little Andaman' was published in *The Eastern Anthropologist* in 1961. In this pioneering paper Ganguly described the cognition of the Onges about their supernatural world in vivid details.<sup>8</sup> The ethnography emerged from Ganguly's painstaking fieldwork during 1953-57 and he stayed among the gatherer-hunter tribe for about eight months in total, learned their language without an interpreter and observed the everyday life of this little community.<sup>9</sup> This short paper of only six pages on a difficult subject is remarkable for its clarity and density of ethnographic details through which the author finally reached a conclusion having wider significance. Let me quote

'In the first place, though the Onges are one of the most primitive tribes of the world, the universe conceived by them is far from simple. It is indeed a remarkable creation of the unsophisticated Onge mind. The supernatural beings living in the different planes or layers of the Onge universe are, strictly speaking, neither divine nor immaterial. They eat, drink, marry, multiply and die just like human beings.....I did not find among the Onge any belief concerning a superior spirit or High God' (Ganguly, '61a:247:248).

With Bimal Chandra Roy as the first author Ganguly wrote another ethnographic paper in *Folklore* in 1961 on the life-cycle customs and ceremonies of the Onges. The meticulous details of the paper in recording the Onge beliefs around birth, marriage and death were marvelous but at the same time the authors also mentioned their failure in recording the chants which were recited during the male initiation rites of the community (Roy and Ganguly, '61).

The next social anthropological paper of Ganguly, which I would take up was an account on the material culture of the Jarawa of Great Andaman published jointly with Anadi Pal in the prestigious journal *Ethnos* of the Ethnographical Museum of Sweden in 1962. This study was done by Ganguly and Pal on the basis of observations and measurements made on a collection of Jarwa implements and weapons given by the

Andaman and Nicobar Police Department to the researchers of the Anthropological Survey of India. This 15 page article contained detailed morphological description, measurement and diagrams of bows, arrows, bark armour, basket, bamboo vessel, bucket and resin torch. In addition, we find in the article how the Jarwas used the spine of the tail of Stingray (a cartilaginous fish related to sharks) to injure their enemies. The most interesting part of the article is the brief theoretical exercise attempted by the authors in the concluding section. I quote from the paper

‘Some anthropologists and linguists accept it as an axiom that language is the most stable part of culture that “linguistic changes do not proceed at the same rate as most cultural changes, which are on the whole far more rapid”. But here we find that the differences between the Onge and Jarawa in respect of material culture are few and unimportant whereas linguistic differences between them are so great that the language of one is incomprehensible to the other. As we do not have adequate data on the culture history of Andaman Islanders, we are unable to offer any satisfactory explanation on the matter. It is, however, quite obvious that after the separation of the Onge from the Jarawa, which took place long ago, their languages underwent many changes in course of time, but their technologies changed very slowly, partly due to the lack of the pressure of social needs and partly due to the limitations imposed by the physical environment’ (Ganguly and Pal, ’62:97-98).

In a footnote to the above paragraph the authors referenced page 26 from the selected writings of Edward Sapir edited by D. G. Mandelbaum which was published in 1949. Suffice it to say that through his empirical data Ganguly had challenged the then established idea on the relationship between language and culture propounded by Edward Sapir in Cultural Anthropology.

Ganguly’s other two articles on Car-Nicobarese oil press and Onge harpoon and spear (written jointly with A. Pal) also deserve attention from social-cultural anthropologists interested in the study of material culture and they were the result of his own fieldwork. These articles were published in *Anthropos* in 1961 and 1963 respectively. Both articles revealed Ganguly’s interest in details. He never forgot to mention the measurements, in drawing the implements and describing almost graphically the method of their use. In the article on Onge harpoon and spear the

authors did not hesitate to refute A. R. Radcliffe-Brown’s assumption on the non-existence of harpoon and spear among the tribes of Little Andaman which included the Onge (Ganguly and Pal, ’63a:557-558).<sup>10</sup> The article on indigenous oil press is a beautiful example of simple description of material culture with photographs and diagrams, which are now-a-days almost absent in the writings of the social-cultural anthropologists in India (Ganguly, ’61b:934-935).

After material culture, I will briefly describe Ganguly’s excursion in the arena of political system found in one of the remote areas of Andaman Island. In 1960 Ganguly and Pal did their fieldwork in Chowra Island which was situated about 48 miles south of Car Nicobar. The fieldwork was conducted for three weeks to collect demographic and physical anthropological data but Ganguly’s interest in social-cultural anthropology led him to gather useful information on the ‘judicial organization’ of the Chowra Islanders. The result of this social anthropological inquiry was published in an article in 1960 in *Folklore* under the title ‘Some aspects of the judicial system in Chowra Island’. In this paper Ganguly and Pal first described the basic structure of governance in the island which was characterised by a territorial subdivision combined with ranked headmen and a supra-village chief. The chief and the 15 village headmen constituted a council (*kanyu-u*) which was the central authority in the island and the government administration of the Andaman and Nicobar also recognized the position of the chief and the village headmen and the government did not also intervene into the working of this tribal institution except in the cases of homicide. The most interesting aspect of this paper is the concrete case studies which were narrated in vivid details and according to the authors

‘From the cases which were brought for trial to *kanyu-u* during the last few years several are presented....It is hoped that these concrete cases will represent the methods of administering justice in Chowra more clearly than what general statements can do’ (Ganguly and Pal, ’60:155).

In the rest of the paper we find detailed cases under (a) drunkenness and assault upon wife, (b) sexual offence, (c) theft, (d) dispute about the ownership of land, and (e) homicide. If one reads the cases one will find the same remarkable clarity and logical consistency with which Ganguly described

the religious life and the material culture of the Onge and the Jarwa of Andaman Islands. This paper on the judicial system however ended with a longer conclusion in which Ganguly and Pal noted the democratic way of dealing with allegations and disputes; although the chief of the island is the highest authority but he cannot decide a case without discussing the matter in the council. Furthermore, we learn from this important ethnographic account that in this patrilineal society of Chowra with primogeniture where women were not admitted to become head of the village or the chief of the island, women were never punished. Even in cases of adultery it was usually the male who was held responsible.

Last in this series of social anthropological papers, I will mention a unique contribution of Ganguly on the ethno-history of the Nicobar islanders. In this long paper published in an off-beat journal (*Journal of the Gujrat Research Society*), Ganguly laboriously searched the ethnic history of the different population groups inhabiting the Nicobar Islands, which included the Shom-Pens. Unlike the typical social-cultural anthropologist Ganguly searched the ethnic origin of the Nicobarese from a bio-cultural perspective.<sup>11</sup> Thus we find him collecting anthropometric and serological data as well as detailed information on demography, history, subsistence activities, social organisation and environment from all possible sources. Finally, with the help of the aforesaid data Ganguly postulated a sequence of migrations in the Nicobar Islands in a holistic framework (Ganguly, '73).

#### *Policy issues around the Onge*

Ganguly's interest in the study of the Onges of Little Andaman took its final shape during the mid-seventies when he published a full-length paper entitled 'The Negritos of Little Andaman Island: a primitive people facing extinction' published in the *Indian Museum Bulletin* in 1975. This paper can be regarded as one of the finest works of Ganguly on policy anthropology. The paper covered almost every aspect of this small island tribe in the context of a global debate on the position of the anthropologists regarding the study of endangered and disappearing populations.<sup>12</sup> Ganguly made his position clear after narrating the differences between two schools of thought on the task of the anthropologists. He quoted

Sol Tax's 1971 editorial of *Current Anthropology* in which Tax observed a 'split' among the anthropologists on what should constitute the urgent task before them after the 8<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences held in Tokyo in 1968. The issue was: should the anthropologists give priority to study the last speaker of a disappearing community to build up their theory or should they accept change as an obvious outcome and invest their time towards their development? Pranab Ganguly while studying the Onges clearly stated his position in the following manner.

'The author feels that the two approaches are not mutually exclusive, but are complimentary to each other. The study of vanishing tribes does not prevent anthropologists from being interested in urgent problems of development and change in large societies; both types of research may be carried on simultaneously' (Ganguly, '75:8).

I will now describe how Ganguly made his attempt to combine the aforementioned approaches in his own way in the long article on Onge. Apart from the detailed and meticulous ethnography written in the classical Malinowskian style which also included the physical anthropology and demographic contours of the tribe Ganguly described the society and culture of the Onges like a professional social anthropologist. He described the material culture, subsistence activities, kinship, marriage, family, rites of passage, political organisation and the religion in a systematic and comprehensive style.<sup>13</sup> The most important part of the paper however is the section on the policy aspects around the major problem faced by the Onges, which was their decreasing numbers. Ganguly investigated the problem of the depopulation of the Onges from a demographic perspective by carefully taking into consideration the three rival hypotheses, which were: (i) economic exploitation, (ii) assassination of the natives by the colonists, and (iii) introduction of new diseases against which the natives had no immunity. He Ganguly was probably the first anthropologist who studied the Onges for a long period of time from a biosocial perspective and differed with the aforementioned hypotheses. The disagreement was based on his own observation and reading of the history of Little Andaman, and he did not hesitate to state his policy recommendations

towards the betterment of the tribe in a bold manner. In Ganguly's words

'Ameliorative measures such as establishment of coconut plantations, introduction of horticulture, distribution of iron implements and other useful articles, carrying out routine health surveys and giving medical relief, etc., though very useful and commendable, cannot prevent the decline of Onge population. These do not even touch the fringe of the real problem. Systematic investigations into the causes of Onge infertility and proper remedial measures against them are now urgently required' (Ganguly, '75:25-26).

Finally, Ganguly proposed that as a long-term measure the Onges should be relocated in the Rutland Island 31 miles north of Little Andaman where they once lived but left the place to get away from an epidemic several decades ago. The island was capable of supporting the Onge population with their traditional mode of subsistence and he suggested that they should be allowed to live there without any outside interference because it would be increasingly difficult for them to survive in Little Andaman owing to 'the rising demands of officials and workers for pork, fish, honey, fruits, etc.' the staple food of the Onges.

#### *The story of human adaptation*

If we look at the works of Pranab Ganguly in a chronological order we find that during 1960-66 he contributed in physical/biological and social-cultural anthropology by using the methods of anthropometry, ethnography and linguistics with equal competence and his interest towards the formulation of policies was also visible in his later work on Onge, which I have just described in the previous sub-section. During the mid-seventies, Ganguly turned his attention towards macro-level data on large samples and he also organised his thoughts around the bigger problems of human adaptation and evolution in an ecosystem framework, although he was not a dogmatic supporter of maintenance of stability.<sup>14</sup> In this context the research of Ganguly, and this was his most remarkable one, was on the gradual decline in average height (negative secular trend) in some tribal and caste populations in India. With Anadi Pal, Ganguly first wrote a short paper in a volume published by the University of Calcutta in

1974. In this paper the authors presented figures on the average height of 20 population groups (caste and tribes) measured by different authorities in an interval of at least 25 years and concluded that unlike many western and Asian countries the studied Indian populations had become shorter since the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Ganguly and Pal, '74). It was a remarkable finding. Ganguly pursued the work and made it global by publishing under his single authorship a whole chapter in a book edited by the famous anthropologist William Stini in World Anthropology series volume by Mouton in 1979. Ganguly began this chapter by challenging the then scholarship in biological anthropology, which presumed that the progressive increase in stature was a universal phenomenon as it happened in many technologically advanced western and non-western countries. In this chapter he demonstrated with the help of simple anthropometric data that in India three groups out of every four have become shorter in varying degrees in course of one or two generations and it was not due to malnutrition or inbreeding but probably caused by a relaxation of natural selection against undersized individuals (Ganguly, '79).

In another pioneering study for which Pranab Ganguly won the prestigious Bertillon Medal of France in 1973 was on the variation in physique in North India in relation to urbanisation and economic status. In this work he showed with the help of carefully controlled experimental design (rare in Indian physical anthropology) the relationship between various somatometric measurements and observations (e.g., height, weight and skin color) and some socio-economic parameters.<sup>15</sup> For example, he found that among the Brahmin and Muslim populations of western Uttar Pradesh in North India, the well-to-do men are significantly taller and heavier and have absolutely broader hips and shoulders than the poor. The increases in different measurements observed in the well-to-do clearly reflected a general enlargement in the size of the body. In the circumferential measurements of limbs and torso, the differences between the economic classes were particularly pronounced. The well-to-do men had significantly larger heads, larger in both length and breadth dimensions, than the poor (Ganguly, '74a:37).

The last remarkable work of Ganguly, which I will

discuss was a theoretical paper entitled 'The problem of human adaptation: an overview' published in *Man in India* in 1977.<sup>16</sup> In this brilliant article Ganguly viewed the major human problems of the modern world (e.g. malnutrition and inequality) from the perspective of adaptation. For him adaptation has to be considered in its broadest sense, wherein society and culture should be included. Under a section of this paper entitled 'Socio-economic Milieu' Ganguly after reviewing the literature exhaustively<sup>17</sup> including his own study on the Brahman and Muslim groups of western Uttar Pradesh commented

'From the foregoing discussion it should be evident that the socio-economic status effect manifests itself at every stage of life from birth to adulthood. The upper class children have significantly bigger bodies than the lower class children, and this difference persists to a remarkable degree in the final adult size. It may be argued that the genetic potential for growth of the Indian children, who suffer under the constraints of adverse socio-economic environment remains to some extent unrealized' (Ganguly, '77:10).<sup>18</sup>

But how does the poor really adapt to this adverse socio-economic deprivation? Ganguly's answer to this basic question can be found in the next section of the article titled 'Nutritional Stress.' I quote him again

'Adaption to malnutrition during critical stages of growth is likely to induce permanent reduction of body size which in turn will reduce the energy needs of the body. People having small body size will survive more easily on low calorie diets and they will have some adaptive advantage in areas where scarcity conditions prevail' (Ganguly, '77:10-11).

At this juncture one may ask a very legitimate question, which is: Did Ganguly view poverty as a kind of adaptation? I would say, yes, Ganguly looked at the unconscious strategies of survival of the poor but he also viewed the extremes of this adaptation. Let us proceed further with him through this paper

'It should be mentioned here that the survival of a population through diminution of body size and reduction of energy requirements is possible if only the nutritional deficiencies remain within tolerable limits. When the stress of malnutrition becomes very acute, the adaptive advantage of size reduction loses much of its significance and the population is threatened with the danger of extinction' (Ganguly, '77:14).<sup>19</sup>

Ganguly's paper on adaptation is a full-blooded

bio-cultural exercise on macro-level policy issues and I regard this Indian Science Congress address of 1977 as the true successor of the lectures delivered by his teachers Tarak Chandra Das in 1941 and Sasanka Sekhar Sarkar in 1951 at the Congress. This is because like his predecessors Pranab Ganguly also dealt with the major national problems and the role of anthropology and anthropologists in providing some solutions to these problems.<sup>20</sup>

#### *Untiring empiricist*

In the early part of my career at Vidyasagar University I was undecided whether I would finally settle at Medinipur or go back to my natal home at Kolkata and I used to discuss this issue with Pranab Ganguly. He never advised me about what should I do. One day I found an interesting article on 'Return Migration' in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* (1980, 9:135-59) and I showed the article to Ganguly. He smiled and said 'You may get the answer of your future permanent residence!' I replied 'What do you think?' Then Ganguly said that 'Demographers on return migration say that chances of returning to one's own home is more if one leaves home at a higher age. So my chances of returning to Calcutta are more than yours!' In fact Ganguly had a great interest in demography, particularly social demography. Interestingly, his last article jointly written with Suvas Bose on the 'Population trends in Midnapore district, West Bengal, 1872- 1981' published in 1992 in the *Vidyasagar University Journal of Social Sciences* is a unique example of social demographic study of a district in India. This article is still not well known in the anthropological circles in the country. In the article Ganguly covered almost all the aspects of socio-demography of the erstwhile Midnapore district by innovatively using the Census reports of India. The most interesting finding of Ganguly and Bose in this paper was the decline of the population in the older townships of Midnapore district. The authors observed that there were only four towns in Midnapore in 1872, which increased to 17 by 1981 but most of the towns in the district grew very slowly in population size. In the words of the authors

'In fact, most of the older towns declined in population number at some stage. Some of them showed signs of revival only in recent times. The towns of Midnapore may



constitute the subject-matter of a very interesting study from anthropological standpoint' (Ganguly and Bose, '92:13).

Pranab Ganguly often tried to encourage us to undertake a study of urbanisation of Midnapore in terms of the sex-ratios of the towns of eastern and western parts of the erstwhile district. He believed that the towns in the western part of the district may reveal a more balanced sex-ratio owing to their closeness with the tribal areas of the district than the eastern towns, which had more caste populations. He even joked with us by saying 'You social anthropologists often forget to mention the most fundamental and objective criterion of a tribe, which is nothing but their balanced sex-ratio!'

#### *Selfless traveler*

Pranab Ganguly visited Poland during June-July 1982 under Indo-Polish cultural exchange programme for studying research methodology and recent trends and advances in physical anthropology in Poland. He was at that time employed at the Anthropological Survey of India. Many researchers from Anthropological Survey of India had gone to visit foreign countries to learn some specialised and technical matters and also for attending seminars and conferences but how many of them have written their day-to-day experience almost like an ethnographer? Pranab Ganguly wrote such an ethnography entitled 'Account of a visit to Poland', which was published in 1983 in the official journal of the Survey. This 20 pages solid and interesting description of the author's encounter with a small European country, which at that time was governed by the communists. Ganguly's style of presentation is simple, straightforward but at the same time informative and interesting.<sup>21</sup> For example, with a few sentences he depicted the population scenario of the country in the following manner

'There was a loss of some six million citizens in Poland during the Second World War among whom men predominated. In 1946 there were 1185 women per 1000 men. The loss has been compensated, and now the number of females surpassed that of males slightly... Poland is now almost 100 per cent Polish in the sense that there are no sizeable minorities. It has one people and one language' (Ganguly, '83:14).

The description however, has a personal touch. If one starts reading the account it would be difficult

to keep it down before finishing it! Let me give another example from his narrative. When Ganguly reached at a taxi stand in a city named Wroclaw at about 10 P.M. he was already soaked in heavy rain and shivering, and there was a long queue. I quote from his inimitable text

'I felt miserable in the cold and rains. Finally, when my turn came, I showed the letter in Polish language containing the address of the Institute of Anthropology to the taxi driver and to my great relief he accepted me. The driver was able to search out the Institute, but it was closed. All the windows were shut and there was no light or sign of life. I knocked on the massive door repeatedly; there was no response. Having no other alternative I requested the cab-man to take me to a cheap hotel. He understood the word 'hotel' but not 'cheap'. He took me to a hotel named Orbis Panorama which I later discovered was a 4-Star hotel' (Ganguly, '83:16).

One would find such lively description of the author's journey in various parts of Poland but it was also full of information about the country and its anthropologists. One would know about the buildings, museums, sex-ratios, employment scenario, and retirement of the university professors, cost of houses and housing conditions, types of food and their prices and the major trends of research in anthropology in Poland. In the final section of his account Ganguly refuted the view that Polish physical anthropology was a 'closed system because most of the articles published in Poland were written in Polish language'. He found many of the articles were summarised and translated into English and other European languages and moreover Polish anthropologists collaborated with their counterparts in Egypt, USA, Mexico and Indonesia, and despite financial constraints the then Polish government actively encouraged their anthropologists to participate in international seminars and conferences abroad. Ganguly commented

'All expenses relating to such participation are borne by the Polish Government. I feel this is another good example which could be followed because science is international; if it is kept confined within narrow national boundaries, it is bound to suffer from severe setbacks' (Ganguly, '83:31).

Ganguly in this dense account never showcased his own research but praised Polish anthropologists and the rich tradition of anthropology in Poland,

which was already moving towards its application. He wanted to learn from the country without being biased by his own views of anthropology. In the article one could see 11 beautiful photographs on various peoples and places of Poland including famous Polish anthropologists but not a single photo of Pranab Ganguly with them or alone! Living in an age of internet driven social media dominated by selfie-culture, it is extremely difficult for me to understand the absence of the author in the photos who could write such a personalised thick description of his visit to Poland. Maybe Ganguly was truly unselfish!

### CONCLUSION

Pranab Ganguly as a professional anthropologist belonged to post-colonial India who practiced intensive fieldwork and published in physical and social-cultural anthropology with equal competence — a rare quality among his contemporaries, which has almost vanished from the succeeding generation of anthropologists in India. Ganguly, however, was not a run-of-the-mill empirical anthropologist. His remarkable works on the progressive decline of stature among sixty endogamous population groups and the relationship of somatic variability with economic condition and urbanisation demonstrated Ganguly's ability to interpret huge mass of empirical data in a theoretical framework, which was basically bio-cultural in nature. Finally, it should be emphasised that Pranab Ganguly was not an ivory tower scholar, who only gathered knowledge but made sincere attempts to apply his findings in formulating policies for the welfare and betterment of the underprivileged sections of the Indian population whether they are the endangered Onges of Little Andaman or the vast majority of the undersized and malnourished people of independent India.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) for supporting me with the financial grants for a Senior Fellowship to conduct research on the nationalist trends in Indian anthropology. This paper is one of its outcomes. I am also grateful to the Institute of Development Studies, Kolkata, for providing me library facilities. I am also

grateful to Indian Anthropological Society for inviting me to deliver a lecture at Vidyasagar University on Professor Pranab Kumar Ganguly on the occasion of the celebration of 100 years of teaching Anthropology in India. I also express my sincerest thanks to my faculty colleagues and students of the Department of Anthropology, Vidyasagar University, for organising the lecture on 6 February 2020 and also for allowing me to reproduce the photograph of Professor Ganguly from the Departmental collection. I owe my debts to my senior student Ms Subhra Bhattacharya of the Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI) for sending me some important articles of Professor Ganguly from the Central Library of the Institute. I would like to express my thanks to Ramu Ram and his staff at the Central Library of AnSI for their assistance in procuring materials for the paper. I also thank my PhD student Ayan Bandopadhyay for preparing the nice power point slides for the lecture out of which this paper developed. I express my sincerest thanks to Professor Jaydip Sen and the anonymous reviewers of *South Asian Anthropologist* for their comments on the paper and meticulous copy editing. Last but not the least, I am indebted to my wife Priti for patiently listening to my day to day progress on the narratives around Pranab Kumar Ganguly.

### NOTES

1. The Directory of Anthropologists in India ('81) published by the Anthropological Survey of India mentioned that Pranab Ganguly was specialised in 'Physical Anthropology' although it noted that the 'Principal publications' of Ganguly included research papers on the 'Religious beliefs of the Negritos of Little Andaman' and 'Notes on the material culture of the Jarwa of Great Andaman' along with other papers on social-cultural anthropology. His D.Sc. thesis was on the somatic variability among the Brahmins and Muslims in relation to urbanisation and economic status.
2. This nomenclature was a creation of Professor Probodh Kumar Bhowmick (1929-2003) of the University of Calcutta. Professor Bhowmick was an eminent anthropologist and happened to be the classmate of Ganguly.
3. Adda is Bengali word, which according to Oxford English Dictionary means 'Informal conversation among a group of people' (<https://www.lexico.com/definition/adda> accessed on 30.10.2020).
4. As far as my knowledge goes the student register introduced by Pranab Ganguly is still being maintained at our department and is helping the faculties to provide

- useful data to the NAAC and UGC.
5. Let me make a lighter digression regarding his accuracy in personal life. Ganguly used to keep clean and fresh currency notes and even coins because he believed that most of the infectious diseases were spread through dirty notes and coins, which passed through innumerable hands!
  6. Pranab Ganguly's life-time friend, classmate and my teacher Professor D. P. Mukherjee once told me: 'I can expand an idea to 100 words, which Pranab can compress into a single sentence!'
  7. Pranab Ganguly used to carry a very old leather bag. I could recollect that on one occasion Professor Amitabha Basu told him 'Pranabda, your great bag seems to be older than Abhijit! Please take a new one!' Ganguly replied, 'I cannot leave this bag and the small old Chamber's pocket dictionary, which I keep in it; they are part of my life!' Ganguly always used the old dictionary whenever he wrote something.
  8. There was no recorded information on the religious life of the aborigines of Little Andaman when Ganguly conducted this study. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown's study was on the communities of Great Andaman and there were marked differences between the tribes of Great and Little Andaman as regards religious beliefs and Ganguly mentioned this fact in the first paragraph of his article (Ganguly, '61).
  9. Three years later Ganguly published a 31-page detailed account on the vocabulary of the Onge in the *Bulletin of the Anthropological Survey of India* which revealed his deep acquaintance with the language and its grammatical structure (Ganguly, '66).
  10. In the *Anthropos* article, Ganguly and Pal categorically stated that A.R.Radcliffe-Brown's 'assumption that the Onge of Little Andaman do not know the use of harpoon and spear is untenable because one of us (Ganguly), who visited Little Andaman Island more than half a dozen times during 1953-1957 and stayed there for more than eight months in total found these weapons in actual and regular use by the Onge'(Ganguly and Pal, '63:558).
  11. Ganguly's bio-cultural perspective was his life-long pursuit. At the end of his career he published an article 'The incidence of Arcus Senilis in Nicobar islands and the Nicobarese food habits' which is an example of this pursuit (Ganguly, '89).
  12. Under the section entitled 'Depopulation of Little Andaman Island' Ganguly noted that there were only 121 Onge individuals in the Little Andaman Island in 1969 and the size of the group diminished from 161 to 121 over the short period from April 1956 to April 1969(Ganguly, '75:11). It is interesting to note that while counting the Onges Ganguly also did not miss the emic view of the community. He mentioned perceptively: 'The Onge cannot count beyond three, but they are very much conscious and concerned about the decay of their population' (Ganguly, '75:11).
  13. Ganguly did not even exclude the sexual life of the tribe in his description. Thus we find him depicting the Onge method of sexual intercourse which was different from the typical missionary posture. At the same time Ganguly also frankly admitted his own shortcomings whenever he failed to collect the required ethnographic data.
  14. Ganguly's comment in *Current Anthropology* on an article entitled 'Darwinian Psychological Anthropology: A Biosocial Approach' by Jerome H. Barkow may be recalled here. Ganguly commented 'I cannot wholly agree with the author's observation that the hominid trait of striving for prestige tends to increase social stability. Instances of destruction of lives and property for the sake of prestige are not rare; such actions tend to induce social disruption rather than social stability' (Ganguly, '73b:380).
  15. Ganguly received three prestigious medals in the same year, viz., Sir Asutosh Mookerjee Gold medal (1975), Bengal Immunity Research Prize and Gold Medal (1975) and Griffith Memorial Prize (1975) for his research on various topics in Anthropology (Directory of Anthropologists in India, '81:110-111).
  16. This paper was delivered as Presidential Address at the Anthropology and Archaeology Section of the 64th Indian Science Congress in Bhubaneswar held in 1977. The wide area of Ganguly's reading of relevant literature in this paper is quite remarkable, which ranged between anthropological studies on human adaptation in high altitude to economic researches on income inequality as well as demographic and nutrition studies on Indian populations.
  18. One should note that Ganguly used the term 'class' not 'caste' since his empirical findings revealed class differentiation within a caste was more important to understand the human biological variation in India—a point little recognized by the social anthropologists. It may be interesting to recall here Ganguly's comment published in *Current Anthropology* on Joan P. Mencher's famous article 'The caste system upside down or the not-so-mysterious East' in 1974. I quote from Ganguly: 'From my field investigations in 12 districts of western Uttar Pradesh, I have gained the impression that the North Indian Brahmins are really no better-off than the low-ranked agricultural castes of that area' (Ganguly, '74b:482).
  19. After this statement Ganguly cited the case of the Juang population of Orissa and mentioned the findings of a biochemist, J. K. Roy of the Anthropological Survey of India who found that owing to severe malnutrition the Juang population was decreasing for the last 25 years.
  20. T. C. Das's lecture was entitled 'Cultural Anthropology in the Service of the Individual and the Nation' and the title of S. S. Sarkar's lecture was 'The Place of Human Biology in Anthropology and its utility in the Service of the Nation'. Das's lecture was published by the Indian Science Congress Association and the lecture of Sarkar

was published in *Man in India* in 1951. In a recent article, I highlighted Pranab Ganguly as one of the true successors of the early nationalist anthropologists in India (Guha, 2020).

21. Ganguly was fond of writing sentences in the active voice. He used to tell me: 'If you want to write a science prose use active voice. Passive sentences make science weak!'

#### REFERENCES CITED

- Chaudhuri Datta, S. S. and P. Ganguly. 1983. Fertility behaviour of female carriers of Haemophilia. *Journal of the Indian Anthropological Society*, 18: 51-54.
- Das, T.C. 1941. Cultural Anthropology in the Service of the Individual and the Nation. pp.1-29. *Presidential Address delivered in the Section of Anthropology in the Twenty-eighth Indian Science Congress*. Benares.
- Directory of Anthropologists in India*. 1981. Pranab Ganguly. Pp.110-111. Edited by A. Basu, M. P. Basu, A. K. Adhikary. Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, Government of India.
- Dutta, P. and P. Ganguly. 1965. Further observations on ear lobe attachment. *Acta Genetica et Statistica Medica*, 15(1):77-86.
- Fisher, R.A. 1935. *The Design of Experiments*. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd.
- Fox, R. 1973. *Encounter With Anthropology*. New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovitch.
- Ganguly, P. 1989. The Incidence of Arcus Senilis in Nicobar islands and the Nicobarese Food Habits. *Journal of the Indian Anthropological Society*, 24: 163-167.
- 1983. Account of a visit to Poland. *Human Science*, 32(1): 13-32.
- 1979. Progressive Decline in Stature in India: A Study of Sixty Population Groups. Pp.315-337. *Physiological and morphological adaption and evolution*. Ed. William A. Stini. The Hague: Mouton Publishers.
- 1978. The Physique of Nicobar Islanders: A Study of Sexual, Populational, and Spatial Variation. *Indian Museum Bulletin*, 13: 7-21.
- 1977. The problem of Human Adaption: an overview. *Man in India*, 57(1): 1-22.
- 1976. *Physical Anthropology of the Nicobarese*. Memoir No.34, Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India.
- 1975. The Negritos of Little Andaman Islands: A Primitive People Facing Extinction. *Indian Museum Bulletin*, 10(1): 7-27.
- 1974a. Variation in Physique in North India in Relation to Urbanization and Economic Status. I. *Bulletins et Mémoires de la Société d'anthropologie de Paris*, XIII<sup>e</sup> Série, tome 1 fascicule 1, 1974. pp. 3-43.
- 1974b. Comment by Pranab Ganguly on J.P.Mencher. *Current Anthropology*, 15(4): 482-483.
- 1973a. The Nicobar Islanders: A Search for Their Ethnic Identity. *Journal of the Gujrat Research Society*, 35: 234-270.
- 1973b. Comment by Pranab Ganguly on J. H. Barkow. *Current Anthropology*, 14(4): 380.
- 1966. Vocabulary of the Negritos of Little Andaman With Grammatical Notes and Materials. *Bulletin of the Anthropological Survey of India*, 15(1-4): 1-30.
- 1961a. Religious beliefs of the Negritos of Little Andaman. *The Eastern Anthropologist*, 14(3): 243-248.
- 1961b. The Car-Nicobarese Oil-press. *Anthropos*, 56(5-6): 934-935.
- 1960. Observations on the teeth of Nicobar islanders. *Bulletin of the Anthropological Survey of India*, IX(2): 43-50.
- Ganguly, P. and A. Pal. 1961. Morphology of Onge foot. *Current Science*, 30(8): 300-301.
- 1960. Some Aspects of the Judicial System in Chowra Island. *Folklore*, 2(3): 153-160.
- 1962. Notes on the Material Culture of the Jarawa of Great Andaman: Their Weapons and Implements. *Ethnos*, 27: 84-98.
- 1963a. Onge Harpoon and Spear. *Anthropos*, 58(3-4): 557-560.
- 1963b. Distribution of Middle Phalangeal Hair among Chowra and Terressa Islanders. *The Eastern Anthropologist*, XVI (2): 122-132.
- 1974. Secular trend in stature in India. pp. 42-48. *Indian Anthropology Today*. Ed. D. Sen. Calcutta: Department of Anthropology, Calcutta University.
- Ganguly, P. and D. P. Mukherjee. 1964. Dermatoglyphics of the Shom-Pen of Great Nicobar. *Anthropos*, 59(5/6): 918-919.
- Ganguly, P. and S. Bose. 1992. Population trends in Midnapore district, West Bengal, 1872-1981. *Vidyasagar University Journal of Social Sciences*, Inaugural Number. Pp.1-13.
- Guha, A. 2016. Pranab Kumar Ganguly (In Memoriam). *Anthropology News*, 57 (7): e159-e160. (First Published online by The American Anthropological Association), <http://www.anthropology-news.org/index.php/2016/07/25/pranab-kumar-ganguly/>
- Guha, A. 2020. Pranab Ganguly: a true successor of nationalist anthropology in India. *Frontier online*, <https://www.frontierweekly.com/views/jun-20/18-6-20-Pranab%20Ganguly.html>
- Mandelbaum, D.G. 1949. *Selected writings of Edward Sapir*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mencher, J. P. 1974. The caste system upside down or the not-so-mysterious East. *Current Anthropology*, 15(4): 469-493.

- Roy, B. C and P. Ganguly. 1961. Some Ceremonial Customs in Onge Life-cycle. *Folklore*, 2(6): 368-374.
- Sarkar, S.S. 1951. The place of human biology in anthropology and its utility in the service of the nation. *Man in India*, 31(1): 1-22.
- Tax, S. 1971. Urgent Anthropology: Associates' views on the definition of "urgency". *Current Anthropology*, 12(2): 243-254.