

IAA International Workshop

Title: “Building Intercultural Competency: Perspectives from Italy and India”

Date: 20th September, 2018

Organized by: Indian Anthropological Association, Department of Anthropology in collaboration with Utkal University and University of Bologna

Venue: International Guest House, University of Delhi

Student Participants: Students from the Summer School organised by *University of Bologna*, Research Scholars from *Delhi University*, *Utkal University* and *Indira Gandhi National Open University*



A Brief Report

Introduction and Welcome Address by Dr. Avitoli G. Zhimo (coordinator)

The Indian Anthropological Association (Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi) in collaboration with Utkal University and University of Bologna, Italy organized a one-day International Workshop on “Building Inter-Cultural Competency: Perspectives from Italy and India” on 20 September 2018 at International Guest House, University of Delhi.

The workshop opened up with the welcome address by Dr. Avitoli G. Zhimo (Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi) as she formally introduced the gathering to esteemed faculty members present to the gathering- Prof. Vincenzo Matera from Department of Cultural Heritage, University of Bologna (Italy), Prof. Stefano Caldirola from University of Milan (Italy) and Prof. Soumendra Mohan Patnaik, Vice Chancellor of Utkal University (Bhubaneswar). Following this, Zhimo, introducing the workshop and the theme for the same, reflected on the complexity of *culture* as a beautiful amalgamation of art, history and literature wherein lies the basic essence of building *an inter-cultural competence* through the ability to develop knowledge, skill and a positive attitude towards other cultures. Zhimo also emphasised on the need to engage in conversations around intercultural competence in the current scenario when the world is a more open place, well connected through various channels of information exchange and interactions. The workshop had an audience of faculty members and scholars from University of Bologna, University of Delhi, Utkal University and Indira Gandhi National Open University.

Special Lecture by Prof. Vincenzo Matera (Dipartimento di beni culturali, Università di Bologna)

Lecture summary

The first special lecture of the day was by Matera who focused on creating a dialogue on interdependence in academic explorations, specifically anthropological endeavours. He began by discussing the ideas around interlinkedness and connections in the field of anthropology. Elaborating on this, he commented on the relevance of understanding the nuances of these notions by asserting that the way we as individuals interpret different cultures and the different identities around us has a great role in our understanding of ‘intercultural competence’. Thinking of cultures and societies as sharply defined units, Prof. Matera

expressed his concern as to how we mark borders, territorialising and differentiating 'us' from the 'others'. According to him, people see cultures as a cage- underlining distances as well as differences and not the similarities that they have or may have instead. However, individuals fail to recognise the hybrid nature of every aspect of their lives and the world, which does not exist in isolation. Thus, people do not allow room for a logical understanding and reasoning in the context of those who they consider as 'others'.

Prof. Matera discussed the work of Max Gluckman (1940) on *Analysis of a social situation in modern Zululand* as a perfect model for ethnographic analysis of interdependence. Taking this as a base where Gluckman illuminated upon the plurality of relationships (*pluri belonging situations*) where he refers to culture, not as a unit, but as a complex set of relationships, Prof. Matera emphasized upon the recognition of *Creolization*, which has developed due to various interconnections between cultures, thereby evidentiary of the fact that cultures and societies always build bridges. The paradigm of *Creolization*, as he explained, is aware of the intercultural nature and the new political order of the world which is no more based on the strong national identities or closure nor separation of cultures, but respects and appreciates the cultural diversity as a rich and powerful resource for the future of humanity.

Comments and Discussion

During the discussion upon the concepts introduced by Matera, some interesting points were made. Referring to the historical trajectories of India and Italy, Prof. Stefano alluded to India as a *thali* (a meal consisting of several small meals), a good example of intercultural interconnections. Prof. Beena Saklani, an expert in Medical Anthropology from HNB Garhwal University (Uttarakhand) gave a similar example as she talked about the adoption of the commonalities as one way of building up intercultural competence. Saklani commented that just like food experiences brings people together, the love for fashion, clothes or attires is another crucial aspect of everybody's lives. Thus, she commented, it is important to identify such ways where one can interact culturally. Mitoo Das (IGNOU) talked about negotiating with the notion of inter-culturalism in one's own personal space before stepping outside. She mentioned about the challenges and the everyday construction of 'bridges' when it comes to accepting the cultural differences in an inter-caste marriage. Kritika Pandey, a PhD Scholar from University of Delhi (DU) rightly expressed the notion of 'intercultural competence' to be a concept which seems theoretically attractive, but practically difficult to achieve as in the

popular understanding, preference is given to 'tolerance' of other cultures, rather than their acceptance. Indrani Mukherjee, a post doctoral fellow deeply acknowledged Prof. Matera's ideas on interdependence. However, she expressed her disagreement in terms of maintaining interdependence when it comes to a political world where power equations are involved. A research scholar from DU, Shrija Soren rightly pointed out that amidst all this, "who gets to get represented?" is a question never asked. It is imperative to bring out the voice of the culture, the people of the community which are being represented.

Special lecture Prof. Soumendra M.Patnaik Vice Chancellor, Utkal University

Lecture summary

The above discussion was followed by a lecture from Prof. Patnaik. Patnaik's lecture focused on the intricacies of treading across the terrains of coexisting intercultural exchanges and conflicts. As there is existence of some robust cultures in the world, Patnaik began by talking about the value that is given to the agency of the actors and the way this agency is being used in the context of issues of intercultural interactions. Conceding to the existence of intercultural tension or friction, Patnaik capitulated that the intercultural space is very much ridden with historically situated processes in both countries- colonialism in India as well as 19th and 20th century conflicts in intra and international levels in Italy. Every culture or community has its own preferences developed as a result of its interaction with its surroundings and the power structures formed within the society itself. The food, for example, is reflective of the politics ecology and religious and cultural beliefs of the specific group and is thus very central to an understanding of societies and communities. Patnaik asserted that thus, like food, the knowledge and understanding lies in connecting such dots and marks to unfold new possibilities in order to build effective intercultural competence. In the context of what Matera said, Patnaik referred to two important connotations with respect to culture: it is a representation depicted through ideas and symbols; and it is effectively an experience. Culture is thus not to be seen from a distance, but explored through lived experiences. Patnaik gave an example of how there are different ways of pursuing knowledge by narrating Michael Polanyi's (1958) work on 'tacit knowledge', where the author asserts that knowledge which is possessed cannot be necessarily expressed; it may be intuitive or experiential as culture is the amalgamation of of all such experiences, a combination of logical reasoning of the mind and the feelings felt by the heart. Thereby, not cultures, but people or the individuals should be taken into consideration as there is not a single person

who is culture free. This is because a person's competency, opportunities, resources or expression of potential lies in their cultural location. Patnaik also discussed how while some individuals are epistemological in their thinking, others might be empirical. Explaining further, he commented that cultural immersions are more of epistemological processes. Assuming that culture is known for creating boundaries, the same holds true for other phenomena too, for example in academics where students are made to follow a particular school of thought, thus forcefully establishing similar intellectual boundaries or limitations. Describing 'culture' as an 'oxymoron' which is a paradox in itself, Patnaik connoted to Geertz's definition of culture wherein he compares culture as an old city, where one cannot expect to find a complete organization, nor a neat disorganisation. Patnaik thus explained his idea of culture using the metaphor of an octopus, whose tentacles do not work in coordination with each other but the animal continues to exist and survive. He ascribed to T.N. Madan's work where the author suggested the importance of perceiving one's own culture before reaching out to gather an in-depth understanding of other cultures as this way a person is able to relate to other cultures through a constant juxtaposition of cultures, thereby providing a reflexive and objective meaning to other cultures. This mutual interpretation of cultures requires a constant revisiting of one's own self. The common goal is to realise that the voice of the other is equally important. These voices may be plural in nature, but instead of concentrating upon how much they differ, we need to focus upon their uniformity. Thus, the idea of ethnography of mutual representation of cultures is to discover boundaries and bridges.

Discussion

The special lecture paved way for interesting worldviews to come forward which ranging from discussing the importance of culture specific issues in micro frames (as raised by Shrila Soren, Delhi University) to the focus on individual narratives to explore community level lived realities (Kritika Pandey, Delhi University and Greta Frulan, Università degli Studi di Milano Bicocca and Bianca Chisari, University of Milano Bicocca). Many Italian students spoke of their first and primary ideas about what India would be like and their experience of witnessing the same firsthand on their arrival and during their stay. Students from Italy who had visited India earlier than this visit too shared how each time, they have had a different experience owing to their different locations of stay which was a testament to the diversity of India as much as the robust specific approaches that would be needed to explore different regions of the country for academic purposes too. Zhimo also added to the discussion

through her ideas around the importance of acknowledging distinctness of cultures to be able to create a harmonious intercultural interdependence.

Open Panel Discussion on "Connecting with others: challenges of language, negotiating gender, building network, meeting academic challenges"

with Prof. Gabriella D'Agostino , Prof Stefano Caldirola, and research scholars and faculty members from Italy, Utkal University and Delhi University

The lecture by PPatnaik was followed by an Open Panel Discussion on "Connecting with others: Challenges of language, negotiating gender, building network, meeting academic challenges" where scholars and faculty members from University of Milan, University of Bologna, University of Delhi, Utkal University and IGNOU participated and expressed their views. The panel discussion touched on the following major themes through its course:

- **Intercultural dependency and challenges of language**

Considering the interaction space, where firstly the participants from two different countries Italy and India had converged and secondly, the Indian students themselves formed a very diverse group with the students belonging to different regions as well as communities, one of the prime questions that arose was of language. This was put forth and discussed in terms of two important issues- methodological challenges of communication in fieldwork and politics and power hierarchies in languages. With many participants from across the group discussing their discomfort with not knowing the language of the people they wanted to interact with for their research, the concerns and difficulties of using translations on the one hand and attempting to learn specific languages for their work came up. Also, with the backdrop of colonial imposition of English as well as a hierarchy that privileges some languages over other in India today was brought in by the Indian participants to discuss the politics that rested in the interaction of and with languages itself.

- **Negotiating gender when connecting with others**

One of the important themes that overlapped with all the other topics of discussion was the inclusion and importance of a gendered perspective on intercultural competence. Many scholars, giving examples of their own lived experiences, shared how a truly intercultural competent system of exploration should engage with deconstructing the gendered binaries, biases and hierarchies that abound across cultures and within them. With different

observations ranging from the growing violence against women in Italy to the conservative cultural practices that exist across regions in India as well as cases of limited mobilities and unequal opportunities in academia as well as beyond, the gathering reflected on what it meant to aspire towards a truly competent intercultural connection that fulfilled the aim of addressing gendered gaps too across research themes, fields and regions.

- **Building network and meeting academic challenges**

Scholars also reflected on the need to create networks of understanding within and between nations from different parts of the world to have a clearer, more intersectional and diverse knowledge discourse. The ideas deliberated on included, as the major themes- exploration of specifics that work on specific regional levels, understanding the relationship between the local distinctiveness and global patterns, developing a comparative understanding that is rooted in historical narratives and knowledge.

- **Going beyond traditional approaches of exploration**

As the panel moved towards questions of methodological challenges and innovation, the scholars brought into discussions, the different ways in which novel intersectional, interdisciplinary methods and theoretical frameworks could produce the effective ways of academic exploration. Some participants also mentioned the different forms of information which could also serve as valuable and complimentary knowledge sources. In this regard Prof. Joshi (Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi) joining the discussion, talked about the anthropo-geographical hypotheses, referring to the existence of heterogeneity in traditions across the world. Providing thoughtful examples of some famous Indian mythological texts, Prof. Joshi explained how anthropological explorations could produce new understandings of religion, society and cultural histories by taking up analyses of these texts as ethnographies. Thus the deliberations pointed towards a need to revitalise and break down boundaries that limit the acceptability of certain texts and sources in anthropological work in particular and social scientific research, in general.

- **Developing criticality through self reflexivity**

The final theme discussed by the participants was on the importance of critical self reflexive practices in research aimed towards intercultural competency. Participants, discussing their own social positions, privileges and struggles deliberated on the requirements to produce writings and works which move beyond traditional notions of objectivity and instead

acknowledge the subjectiveness and by that extent the limitations and possible biases that could affect these efforts. The group deliberated on the importance of contextualising research in the diverse, ever-changing settings where class, caste and politics of ethnicities affect access to information and resources, among other things. This was also important as Prof. Joshi stated, in the era where cultural diversity and coexistence are under threat from different sources. Thus, for an actual effective step towards intercultural competency, the first initiative would be to listen rather than deduce one's own interpretations of phenomena and to make sure that the voices of the people that are being worked with do not diffuse with the researcher's own context and narrative of the same issue.

Thus, the panel discussion concluded with an agreement of the relevance of acceptance of diversity in its diverse forms as the important step towards developing competent intercultural networks among both individuals and groups.

Vote of Thanks

At the end of the workshop, Zhimo gave a warm vote of thanks to the gathering. She thanked the esteemed resource persons Prof. Patnaik, Prof. Mattera and Prof. Caldirola for sharing their time, immense knowledge and invaluable insights with the students and opening up new ideas for them to pursue and work on. She commented that she felt particularly grateful for the inspiring initiatives by Prof. Patnaik and his constant guidance in successfully executing the same. She also thanked the esteemed faculty members Prof. P.C. Joshi, Dr. R.P. Mitra, Dr. Kennedy Singh for taking time out to join the workshop. She commented that she was grateful for Prof. Joshi's presence in the panel discussion and his illuminating observations as well as support. She lastly thanked the student and faculty participants coming in from their specific institutions for their active engagement and eagerness to be a part of discussions and debates, which she commented was the most important part in making the workshop a good learning experience.