

BOOK REVIEW

Chumki Piplai: *Migration and Human Variation: A Study on Tribal Tea-Labourers*. New Delhi: Mittal Publication, 2014, 209 pp., INR 750 (hb). ISBN 81-8324-460-2

The book under review is the modified version of the doctoral dissertation of Dr. Chumki Piplai, a physical anthropologist by training. The idea of the book is quite interesting as it brings in a comparative perspective to understand the biological changes, if any that may result from the social process called migration. Piplai situates the problem of the study among the two tribal communities and located them both in tea zone of northern Bengal and also compared the case of biological changes (of one community) by considering the situation of their place of origin. To be more specific the book provides an account of anthropometry conducted on two prototypes: 1) comparison of an ethnic group- the sedente and migrant Oraons, who are genetically similar but were placed in different ecological conditions and 2) comparison of two different ethnic groups (the Oraons and the Tamangs) sharing similar ecological environment and socio-economic conditions.

The author furnished a huge collection of anthropometric data drawing comparisons on the sedente and migrant Oraons and between the two ethnically different migrant tribal groups located in the same ecological condition - the Oraons and the Tamangs. There are eight chapters in this book dealing with the various dimensions of physical anthropology applied to understand the research problem. The introductory chapter is well equipped with a synoptic view of human migration - the major issue the book deals with. She explained how from the time of early hominid (*homo-erectus*) adaptation to various environmental conditions due to migration did take place. A great deal of literature survey has been made on the question as to how human migration leads to the adaptation to new environment and how does change occur to their morphology as an ensuing process.

The author seemed to be quite confident in her proposition that migration does affect human biological traits although the effects

can be both positive and negative. It may affect the demographic traits like fertility, mortality, physical growth, adult body dimension, hematological conditions and even blood pressure. Migration may also affect the adaptive domains of each migrant group on the basis of socio-cultural factors. These aspects though significant from cultural anthropology standpoint, did not figure out much in Piplai's work as her work was conducted from the vantage point of physical anthropology. Based on these arguments the author made modest attempts to examine two particular issues- (i) to identify biological changes which might be the effect of migration to a new habitat by comparing the sedente and migrant Oraons and also (ii) to ascertain whether the biological changes were due to migration or ethnicity. In order to explore the first objective the author compared the sedente and migrated Oraons while for the second she did choose to compare two genetically different migrant tea labourers - the Oraons and the Tamangs - of the Duars region of West Bengal.

The second chapter of the book gives us a glimpse of a short history of tea industry of India in general and of Duars region in particular. Piplai looked into the fact how the tea labour was almost composed of migrant population than the locals because the latter were not ready to work as plantation labourer. She gave a brief account of both the Duars region of Jalpaiguri district and Gulma region of Chotanagpur area covering issues such as history, socio-economic conditions of the people located in both the places. The chapter also dealt with the author's study design which is based on conventional method of comparison of a group in its native habitat with its counterpart in a new habitat, and comparison with another group in the same habitat.

The third chapter presents a vivid description on the demographic aspects of the studied groups. There were several tables containing the comparative figures of the population showing the demographic differentials on issues such age, sex, marital status, multiple marriage, fertility etc. The huge amount of field data was analyzed through numerous tables representing the data in a comparative manner. The methods used for analyzing the data were mainly statistical. Besides chi square test and graphic representation of data the study also involved the methods like age cohort, binomial test and Crow's index.

Chapter four deals with anthropometric measures on a comparative basis of physical growth, adult body dimension, haematology and blood pressure. The discussion of anthropometric measures follows in chapter five where the author placed her findings. The results of the study showed that the effects of migration on demographic traits especially on fertility and mortality were more significant among the migrants compared to the sedente group. However, in case of physical growth the findings of the study did counter the existing trend of research outputs available in this field. Major works on migration studies do reveal that the migrants due to their improved living conditions have better physical stature compared to their sedente counterpart. On the basis of her study Piplai discounted the existing research findings and came to the conclusion that migrant Oraons did reveal lower body mass, short height in children, and children with lighter and lower values of chest girth compared to the non-migrated Oraons (p. 165). The result might be related to various factors ranging from socio-economic, cultural environment of the migrants. However, the scope of her research limits the author to explore the causes of such differential results in a holistic manner. Although, inhabiting the same physical environment the ethnicity related factor of the migrants played a major role in the biological differences they inherited. This was true of the Tamangs as compared to the Oraons in her study. Though these ethnically different groups were situated in the same ecological set up and they shared similar socio-economic conditions yet they inherited certain differences related to their adaptation in a new habitat.

The book was published in the year 2014 but the data used in it were pretty old. The field work (conducted in phases during 1979, 1981 and 1984) done for the study and the final publication of its results in a book form has a gap of over three decades. One may wonder why the author did avoid updating at least the secondary data (gleaned from Census and other sources) used in the book. Unlike the Oraons (of the present field situation) whom the author compared with their place of origin, the Tamangs, who were claimed to be the natives of Nepal (p. 27) were studied in their 'new habitat' alone (avoiding the sedente counterpart of the Tamangs of Nepal) and were compared with the Oraons (whose sedente counterparts of Chotanagpur region were considered by the author). The sub-title of the book gives the impression that it is

a study on 'tribal tea labourers'. However, it is not very clear as to what were the considerations on the basis of which the author referred to the Tamangs as Tribes. This appears to be a matter of serious concern when one finds that the Tamangs were declared as a Scheduled Tribe (only in the states of Sikkim and West Bengal during 2002-03) in the new Millenium only. Assuming that the concern of an anthropologist and the state may not necessarily coalesce especially with regard to the much debated idea of 'who/ what is a tribe' in Indian situation, it was expected that the author would have presented some justifications behind her consideration of the Tamangs as a tribe.

The book is significant for those interested in the migration study based on anthropometry. However, it does serve less to the interest of those who are inclined to look at migration from the stand point of cultural anthropology. This book will be a further addition to Piplai's serious academic interventions, which she had already made (even a cursory look at the bibliography can reveal this) during her tenure of service in Anthropological Survey of India as a trained physical anthropologist.

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