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Empathy without Illusions: André Béteille and Sociology as a Vocation

By: Nandini Sundar

"André Béteille represented a world that now seems to have vanished. Re-reading his work after his passing, I realise how much I missed, how many conversations I should have had with him, and how very lucky I was to have known him."

Since André Béteille passed away, I have felt a lingering sadness that goes beyond the sorrow one might expect when a loved - and intellectually generous - teacher dies. Perhaps it is because Béteille represented a world that now seems to have vanished - where university faculty had time to think and read, where economists and sociologists at the Delhi School of Economics talked across disciplinary boundaries, where the small number of students meant that one could remember each as an individual, where wages were low compared to what we have now but it was scholarship and not salaries which mattered.

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Sociology has always been a relatively marginal discipline within the social sciences in India compared to the much larger and assertive fields of economics, history and political science, but somehow, the totemic existence of André Béteille bound us together, making us feel that we too mattered.

Writing that someone could have taught anywhere in the world but wanted to work in India is often seen as praise, an indication of their 'world-class' status. But for Béteille, as for MN Srinivas, JPS Uberoi, Satish Saberwal, TN Madan, and several others of their generation, the second cohort of scholars who built up sociology in post-independence India, working in India was not a second-class choice. They represented a kind of Nehruvian social science where one could be independent, non-aligned, and also global. India was as important a place to do sociology from as any other. In fact, what Srinivas, Béteille and others developed at DSchool was a new disciplinary form that confidently combined sociology and anthropology, which they called comparative sociology. Although there has been pressure to Indianise the syllabus in recent years, DSE's teaching programme has been remarkable for its ecumenical and comparative scope.

From Chandannagar to Calcutta to Delhi

Béteille studied anthropology in Calcutta university with NK Bose and KP Chattopadhyay, before coming to Delhi to join the newly launched Department of Sociology under Srinivas. In the 40 years from 1959 when he joined as lecturer to 1999 when he retired as professor, the D. School was his institutional and intellectual home. He continued to be on the books as Emeritus Professor of the department till he died.

Béteille has described Bose and Srinivas as the two major influences on him. But what was transmitted appears to have been intellectual style, and not method or theme. What Béteille took from them was an interest in the changing world around him, and the idea that everything must be subject to sociological analysis. Unlike Bose and Srinivas, Béteille was emphatically not a fieldworker. Other than his doctoral research, which he did in Tamil Nadu at the insistence of Srinivas who wanted him to study a far-away place, Béteille did no fieldwork, bringing comparison and observation of large-scale processes to bear on his scholarship instead.



Some elements of Béteille's skill for comparative sociology are also visible in his lovely account of his childhood and youth in Chandannagar and Calcutta, *Sunlight on the Garden*, especially his description of his two grandmothers, one French and one Bengali. This inheritance meant that Béteille was fluent in both Bengali and French, reading a range of French literature - Molière and Racine, Balzac and Flaubert, Baudelaire, Verlaine and Rimbaud - in the original, as also the sociologist Raymond Aron and others. As for Bengali, his sociological-cum-linguistic fluency is evident in his translation of Bose's Bengali '*Hindu Samajer Garan*' into English, as *The Structure of Hindu Society* (1975).

Béteille had started writing a successor volume to *Sunlight*, but sadly, after a chapter on his life in the Fellows Court at Gwyer Hall, he stopped. We do not have his own account of his years at the D. School, though his essays, 'A Career in an Indian University' (*Antinomies of Society* 2000) and 'My Formative Years in the DSE' in the volume on *D. School* edited by Dharma Kumar and Dilip Mookherjee gives us a good sense. He had friends outside the department such as TN Madan at IEG, outside the country such as Alan McFarlane, Jonathan Parry and Chris Fuller, and outside the discipline like JDM Mehra from the anthropology department, and the economists Sukhamoy Chakravarty, Mrinal Dutta Chaudhuri and Dharma Kumar. He dedicated his book *Antinomies of Society* to Dharma - they were both embattled liberals in a world of Marxist scholarship - for Béteille, this battle took place in his native Calcutta, and for Dharma, within the discipline of history. We now also have the accounts of former students who have [described his clear and concise lectures](#), how he never missed a class, and how he [reached the department every morning by 8.30 am](#).

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I was neither his student nor a colleague but I sort of inherited him from my mother, who studied at D. School in 1960-62. Although she topped her batch in Economics, she [writes in her memoirs](#) that she did not enjoy the subject as much as she enjoyed the courses she took in sociology. Though she was never his direct student, Béteille always asked after her and when decades later, I was stuck doing fieldwork in Bastar he agreed to meet me at her request. My aim was to study resistance and ideas of the state, but the villagers were not very forthcoming with either. So Béteille recommended doing a household census while I waited for these ethnographic gems to materialize. It would be a way of getting to know people and having something concrete to do, he said. It was excellent advice, one of many such that were to follow. Later, when I joined the department and would complain about something or the other, he would listen dispassionately, steering me beyond immediate indignation to seeing the situation sociologically. Others too have commented on his [equanimity](#), his distanced and yet perceptive analysis, and [his kindness](#). He never let his fondness for anyone get in the way of his clinical judgement of them, but equally, we knew that even if he saw through our pretensions, this did not cloud his affection for us.

Intellectual Self-discipline

Béteille held many positions and received many distinctions - as Honorary Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute, London (2001-20026), as Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy (1992-2026), as National Research Professor (2007-2017), and as Member of the Sameeksha Trust which runs EPW. He was Chairman, ICSSR (2005-2008), and Chancellor of NEHU and Ashoka University, among several other things. He also got the Padma Bhushan in 2005. But none of this was as important to him as whether his intellectual work would be read and remembered. In October 2012, in one of his emails to me, he wrote: "In very bad shape. Struggling with being chairman of the Education Commission. My writing days have ended. Now instead of books I will write Reports." Fortunately, for us as for him, the books far outnumbered the reports.

Béteille used to say that teaching helped him intellectually tide over the fallow periods between books because it was impossible to always do fresh research. But writing for him was equally a vocation. He religiously typed out 500 words a day, a habit he developed while writing his dissertation. In October 2011, he wrote to me that he had just handed over two manuscripts to the publishers, and had nothing much to do except read novels. But he added, "Doing this for a long time troubles my Calvinist spirit."



Another mail reflects the same discipline, applied this time to his reading of literature, whether Proust or Tagore, both of whom he was very fond of. This one dates from June 2012: "I read Rabindranath's novella *Shesher Kabita* or The Last Poem. It is an awful sentimental fantasy about romantic love, set in the Shillong Hills which I used to visit regularly when I was Chancellor of NEHU. I had read the novella straight out of school, like every Bengali adolescent, and read it again two or three times. Every time I realize that *Shesher Kabita* is absolutely awful, but every time I read it through till the bitter end. That is what I mean when I say that intellectual life is a form of self-discipline and not a form of self-indulgence."

Béteille repeatedly insisted that a sociologist cannot be a moralist, to study society was not to take sides. Yet in his dedication to comparative analysis, to clear-eyed understanding, and to the discipline of the mind, he showed that doing sociology could itself be a form of public service and a moral intervention. His newspaper columns, published as *Chronicles of our Times* (Penguin 2000) were a form of public sociology before the term became popular.

Social Stratification as the Key to Sociology

While it would be impossible to cover the full range of Béteille's work (see the Appendix for a list of his books), given his prodigious output, here I discuss it under four large rubrics: his attempt to place social stratification at the heart of sociology, his comparative analysis of equality and inequality, his debunking of received wisdom on tribes and peasants in his work on agrarian sociology, and his analysis of institutions, including universities.

Caste, Class and Power (first published by the University of California Press in 1965) had a deceptively simple argument - that traditionally in Tamil Nadu but also more generally in Indian villages, there was a strong overlap of caste, class and power, with Brahmins dominating all three fields. However, drawing on Weber, Béteille shows how these were actually three different axes, and they were moving apart. Power was moving to the backward classes politically - both through party politics and the panchayat system, and there was class differentiation even among the Adi Dravidars or Dalits. In an anthropological field dominated by kinship and religion, and ritual understanding of caste, this focus on class and power was a very important step forward. It was also a concern that was to stay with him informing his analysis of Mandal politics.

Béteille then moved on to examining agrarian sociology on a larger canvas. One influential article in Béteille's *Six Essays in Comparative Sociology* (1974), challenged the idea of the 'tribe'. He showed that the tribe-peasantry distinction in India did not hold in terms of any of the commonly advanced criteria: size, isolation, religion, and means of livelihood. Some Indian "tribes" - Santhal, Gonds, Bhils were very large and spread over extensive territory. Tribes, he would later argue, would survive as a political assertion, long after they had ceased to have any descriptive meaning.

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My copy of Béteille's *Marxism and Class Analysis* (OUP 2007) is inscribed: "from a confirmed reactionary to a half-hearted radical." While his description of me may have been apt, his tongue in cheek description of himself was clearly not. In many ways, his work was far more radical than that of several others because he subjected India and the West to the same analytical lens. When most Indians - then and now -lack the confidence (or wherewithal) to study phenomenon on a global scale and stick to analysing their own society, Béteille was able to scrutinize the West for its pretensions to equality. His critique of Dumont in an essay titled 'Homo Hierarchicus, Homo Equalis' in *The Idea of Natural Inequality and Other Essays* (OUP 1983) takes on not only an idealist view of society (Dumont's purity-pollution principle) but also notes sardonically, "Someone who grew up in an India that was still a colony of Britain is not likely to be easily convinced that homo hierarchicus is uniquely Indian or that the European is the essence of homo equalis." He was one of the first sociologists to bring the enactment of the Constitution into his analysis of society, noting the change in ideas and identities it had introduced. Although his views on affirmative action invited accusations of being conservative, his essay on the idea of natural inequality is also a sustained critique of the idea of 'merit' that has informed upper caste anti-reservation politics. What he was interested in was parsing the idea of equality and inequality in their multiple dimensions.

In his later years he became increasingly concerned with institutions, especially the university, which he regarded as an important modern mediating institution between the individual and state, a space for cosmopolitanism that was different from the family and caste. Presciently, he noted that Delhi University was likely to follow the same pattern of institutional decline as other universities in India (*Antinomies* 2000). As always, he was realistic enough to know there were no quick fixes - autonomy and academic integrity required

dedication.

Re-reading his work after his passing, I realise how much I missed, how many conversations I should have had with him, and how very lucky I was to have known him. I shall miss visiting him in the beautiful home that Esha Bêteille created, and which he shared with his daughters Radha, Tara and his grandchildren.

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Appendices:

Books

(I am grateful to Radha Beteille for this list of books)

Anti-Utopia: Essential Writings of André Bêteille (edited by Dipankar Gupta). Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005

Equality and Universality: Essays in Social and Political Theory. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003

Sociology: Essays on Approach and Method. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002

Antinomies of Society: Essays on Ideologies and Institutions. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000

Chronicles of Our Time. Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000

The Backward Classes in Contemporary India. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992

Society and Politics in India: Essays in a Comparative Perspective. London: Athlone Press (LSE Monographs in Social Anthropology, No. 63), 1991

The Idea of Natural Inequality and Other Essays. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983 (new enlarged edition, Oxford University Press, 1987)

Equality and Inequality: Theory and Practice. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983 (as editor)

Ideologies and Intellectuals. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980

Inequality Among Men. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977 (Italian edition published as *La diseguaglianza fra gli uomini*: Bologna: Il Mulino, 1980)

Encounter and Experience: Personal Accounts of Fieldwork. Delhi: Vikas, 1975, (as editor with T.N. Madan)

Studies in Agrarian Social Structure. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1974

Six Essays in Comparative Sociology. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1974 (enlarged edition published as *Essays in Comparative Sociology*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987)

Inequality and Social Change. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1972

Castes: Old and New, Essays in Social Structure and Social Stratification. Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1969

Social Inequality: Selected Readings. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969 (as editor; Swedish edition published as *Den Sociala ojämlikheten*. Stockholm: Rabén Sjögren, 1972)

Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965