ETHICS MATTERS!

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Journal of the Indian Anthropological Society, the official organ of the Indian Anthropological Society (IAS), has sustained itself for fifty-six long years. This is the first issue of the fifty seventh volume. The Journal published articles of substance and variety from the very beginning in all of the sub-disciplines of anthropology and allied disciplines, as well. However, scanning the cumulative index of the Journal has revealed that there has not been any entry on ethical issues and challenges pertaining to anthropological research in general and India in particular. Despite the fact that the ethical aspects and concerns are imbedded in anthropological research, no such debate and discussion occurred in the earlier days among the anthropology fraternity in India. Therefore, there was possibly no felt need to publish articles on this topic or any attempt to bring it to the fore. During the time when we did our post-graduation in anthropology, i.e., early 1970s, our curriculum didn’t have anything in particular to discuss ethics formally with the solitary exception of Piltdown fraud which was a point of discussion as an example scientific misconduct. Some changes have taken place currently and possibly post-graduates in anthropology in India learn a little bit more on ethics. But even today, text books in anthropology, biological, cultural and archaeological, do not keep much space for discussion in the area of ethics and how it is related to anthropology. Nevertheless, some dedicated books on the research on ethics are now available. Another feature which is very striking is that in spite of a hundred years of experience of post-graduate teaching in anthropology in India and the existence of IAS, the oldest professional body of anthropology for sixty-three years now, there doesn’t exist any ethical code for its members. It appears that although Indian Anthropology always tried its best to follow international/western trend of research as far as practicable, yet when it comes to formalizing professional ethics related considerations it remained somewhat indifferent. Ethics largely remained as an issue to be comprehended by an individual anthropologist as to how one learns and looks at morality and acts morally as a professional and otherwise.

The discipline of anthropology is vast as it is mandated to study man in its entirety. It, therefore, does have its sub-disciplinary boundaries, which are not always fixed, and remains loosely attached to social, biological and natural sciences. Considering the vastness of the discipline the types of researches that are contemplatable are too varied. Dealing with man and his works, both
dead and living, in the perspective of space and time will certainly warrant attention to a wide variety of researches that will create manifold ethical challenges and concerns. Anthropological fieldwork, necessary laboratory works, excavations/expeditions and the like for data collection of varied types from a wide variety of populations/communities following appropriate methodologies under the domains of different sub-disciplines of anthropology will be necessary to pursue researches on the mother of all human sciences. And a good science is inextricably linked with good ethics. Following this logic, anthropologists of all standing should always be well-trained in their own science on the one hand and ethical issues, on the other.

History of wrong-doings in research is rich enough. The immoral medical experiments on humans in Nazi Germany during the World War II paved the way to Nuremberg trials, the judgements of which culminated into the Nuremberg Code of 1947, incidentally one of the initial documents of modern research ethics. The Tuskegee experiment in the US is another case in hand. This immoral syphilis study conducted between 1932-1972 by the US Public Health Service has been the most infamous biomedical research endeavour in the US history. Belmont Report in 1979 was the outcome of the need to safeguard research participants from such unethical practices and it became the first national guidelines for biomedical research by following ethical norms in full. It recommended establishment of an Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) as well as provisions that necessitated oversight of research by Institutional Review Boards. The list of research malpractices is long covering practically all parts of the globe starting from the past to the present. To circumvent the problems, codes in research ethics were formulated. Apart from the ones mentioned already, some important international ethics guidelines are: Declaration of Helsinki in 1964, a document of enormous importance related to research ethics created by the World Medical Association as adopted in the 18th World Medical Assembly held in Helsinki, Finland. The Council for International Organizations jointly with the World Health Organization came forward with “International Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical Research Involving Human Subjects” in 1993. Nuffield Council of Bioethics, United Kingdom, published a report titled “The Ethics of Research Related to Health Care in Developing Countries”. The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights was made in 2005.

In India, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) did the pioneering work in formulating research ethics guidelines by providing the ‘Policy Statement on Ethical Considerations Involved in Research on Human Subjects’ in 1980. This policy statement was updated to release the “Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical Research on Human Subjects” in 2000, which was again revised in 2006 as “Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical Research on Human participants”. The latest revision of the ICMR guidelines was done in 2017 under the title “National Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical and Health
Research involving Human Participants”. This is a very comprehensive work covering wider topics of importance. It certainly can serve as the benchmark guidelines for Indian researchers. There are other attempts by the ICMR and other Government organizations in preparing guidelines for specific issues. Furthermore, in 2000 the “Ethical Guidelines for Social Science Research in Health” was released by the National Committee for Ethics in Social Science Research in Health, which was published by the Centre for Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes.

It is to be noted that the guidelines, whether international and national, are primarily based on principles of ethics, especially bioethics, a sub-field of applied ethics. The principles are: autonomy/respect for persons, beneficence, non-malfeasance and justice. Any research that involves human participants will need consideration to take care of these attributes, irrespective of the discipline it represents. A phenomenon which is evident is that guidelines are periodically revised in order to cope with social, cultural, technological and other changes occurring in the society, at large. Nevertheless, guidelines generally are not legal instruments and therefore can be the guiding instrument for appropriate ethical considerations to accompany a good scientific pursuit. Ultimately, everything rests on individual understanding and effort given. Anthropologists who conduct empirical research on both biological and socio-cultural aspects of different human groups should appropriately be responsive and sensitive to the ethical issues and concerns.

Throughout the globe, institutions conducting researches of any type involving human research participants are generally having their own Institutional Review Board/ Institutional Ethics Committee (IEC). The main purpose of the IEC is to examine the submitted research proposal in the perspective of ethical necessities and concerns associated with the project with the overarching goal of protection of dignity, safety, rights and well-being of research participants. Ethical implications of chosen research design or strategy will therefore have to be examined by the IEC. The formation of the IEC as an institution and the modalities of its functioning in order to appropriately follow ethical review procedures for the submitted proposal are currently a pre-requisite for conducting research studies. In India, establishment of IEC in non-medical institutions for reviewing research proposals involving human participants started generally from the year 2000 and beyond. Conducting genomic studies among human populations having ethical, legal and social issues necessitated establishing IECs for ethics review. Requirements of ethics review for research funding and publication was of additional importance. Since mandatory registration for the IECs is not required till date, streamlining of many IECs is not yet complete. Many of these function with untrained members and in an ad hoc manner. There are also criticisms in respect of functioning of many IECs to act bureaucratically. However, it is to be surmised that the ethics review process is a multi-
disciplinary exercise and is based on both scientific and ethical considerations. For this purpose continuous training and learning for the IEC members will be necessary. Again, those researchers whose research proposals will be evaluated for clearance from the IEC should have some training or interest in learning issues on research ethics. In India this is virtually lacking.

It appears that in India workshops on research methodology for doctoral students are regularly being organized by the universities. Young faculty also remain a part of it, where some lectures on research ethics are delivered. Fortunately, some workshops, symposia, round table discussions are also being organized on ethical issues and challenges they pose to anthropological research. The proceedings of such events contain writings by several Indian young and senior anthropologists on a variety of ethical issues and challenges in anthropological research cross-cutting sub-disciplinary boundaries. Similarly, there have been attempts to formulate guidelines for anthropological research in the arena of social sciences (see e.g., Biswas, 2014, 2021; Misra, 2021). These are encouraging signs in our effort to create proper environment for ethics research and education in India and motivate the Indian anthropologists in that direction. More and continuous efforts should be made in organizing ethics lectures, symposia, and workshops by the Anthropology departments of different universities, research institutions as well as by the professional bodies of anthropology in India in order to consider ethical issues lying imbedded in anthropological research but remain beyond the purview of the IEC. It is high time to prepare code of ethics for the members of the professional bodies of anthropology in India, either singly or preferably jointly. Hopefully, some attempts towards this end are afoot already. No doubt, maintaining publication ethics and putting a curb on unethical research practices demand top priority. As such, they need to be further encouraged and promoted. The Journal of the Indian Anthropological Society should not only go for a critical assessment of manuscripts received from ethical point of view but also underline the challenges pertaining to empirical researches among human populations undertaken by the anthropologists and the researchers from allied disciplines.

REFERENCES