

Editorial

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Revisiting Anthropology in Today's Context

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Anthropologists have gone through a long journey in the advancement of the tools that help us to understand humans from many angles. Today, we have arrived at a juncture where we are inundated with so much information that putting together and making sense of it all, has become a big mission in itself.

Being an anthropologist, I have had the opportunity to closely observe societies taking a quantum leap from the age of subsistence to the age of plenty. The great strides in technological development from stone tools to the electronic/digital devices in the hands of a common man to the growth in food production using technology. Yet, the environment challenging us on a daily basis.

The next question is, are we all developing at the same pace throughout the globe? No, we see a great variation in the level of technology being used in different societies. I took my students in 1989 to conduct a genetic study of people living in the caves in Malappuram District, Eranad Taluk, Kerala, South of India called the Cholanickens and forest dweller called Kattunayakana. They were and still are gatherers with no technology around. Even today, they follow the same life style that has come down the generations.

Therefore, it is the right time to observe effects of the shift in cultural traditions to analyze if we have come to develop a peaceful mind or have become more stressed humans, who are losing the mind in one way or the other. The struggle for existence still being there on a daily basis. So, where do we stand in comparison with the societies where cultural traditions are being preserved?

This is the area now scientists have been looking into, as with all the progress achieved at the material level seems to not help us to be peaceful and fulfilled. When over a period of time, we slowly come to a point in our health where we are afflicted with diseases like Alzheimer, Parkinson, macular degeneration, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), diabetes, hypertension, arthritis, cancer and the like; then we ask the question where did we go wrong or was it just that we were swayed away with the change of times. These debilitating diseases seem to arrive at a stage when we are already in the midst of crisis, almost on an autopilot mode in life. Doing what we know best in our endeavors or how we have learnt to run our lives for a long time. Is this because, we are living longer than our body can sustain and extending our life span with the help of medical fixes?

Therefore, we are at the juncture of revisiting our lives and shift in cultural traditions to see where we are headed to in the future. How our biology will be impacted by technology and change in our environment, be it in the womb or later in life? The field of epigenetics has arrived in a big way in many research studies. The term epigenetics was coined by Conrad Waddington,¹ as "*the branch of biology which studies the causal interactions between genes and their products, which bring the phenotype into being*".¹ Today, the field of evolutionary developmental biology has taken great strides in unravelling the story of human evolution. We are able to see the effect of genetics and environment in shaping the phenotype of a human. So, cultural traditions have a great impact on our biology. Therefore, biocultural evolution is being looked into at a deeper level.

Today, life of a common man is being changed dramatically by the cell phones, iPads, tablets, computers and the television. Young toddlers are becoming addicted to these gadgets. The mothers handing the child with the device and finding a moment of free time for herself. It starts very mildly but then the brain gets trained in a particular manner, which can have long lasting effect on the brain and the behavior. There are no detailed scientific studies to prove or to deny such associations but looking at developmental mechanisms one can understand that there will be some effect as the brains are still developing. Therefore, these could be the future issues that may appear in this Anthropology - Open Journal.

We know today that the incidence of children suffering from autism (a complex neurological disorder that typically appears in the first three years of life) is on the rise. Typically, autism impacts the ability of a person to socially interact with others. Boys being affected in more numbers than the girls. I want to bring attention to a new kind of autism that I like to term as “Digital Autism” that is on the rise in every society. What I mean by digital autism is that people being on the digital device tend to lose the sense of the surrounding. They get glued and addicted to the digital world while not connecting to the immediate surroundings. This is already visible in the society in a big way. People have stopped wishing each other on the road, in a bus, a train or an airplane as though it is not anymore the norm of the day. The moment people sit on a chair they open their digital device. Even while walking on the road or driving a car, the gadget is always on the mind and operative. The ears mostly being plugged. How real could it be for a normal life? It has disconnected us in a special way from live communication to a virtual communication with the near and dear ones locally and connected us globally in a big way, seems paradoxical. We are addicted to Facebook, twitter, video games and the like. We feel very secure in our digital cocoon. Somehow the food should reach the stomach and energy be distributed to the system to keep the robotic mind going.

What will be the impact of this phenomenon on our biology and the future of the global cultures? There are good and not so good aspects of this shift in the cultural paradigm and how this shift is slowly making people more digitally autistic. While the same digital device can help an autistic child to be more connected. Is this going to be the new cultural norm?

To begin with, globally we have several good impacts due to the digital development. It has done wonders for the communities all over the globe to be connected. People now know more about other cultures. Like to learn more about various cultural practices, right from religious text to tourism to shifting residence to another location, hence adopting to a totally different lifestyle than they were born into. You can keep paying your bills on time with no postage or envelop. Paper gets saved and we go green. Train, bus and airline tickets can be purchased on line, homes can be bought and sold online. Any subject can be mastered. Any concept researched. The question is, what cannot be done *via* the digital world? Yet, the question is are we widening the gap between the technology driven mind and the technophobic?

I was born in India when we had less technology around and today many people have a smart phone in their hands all the time. They may not have a computer but a smart phone is really on the rise. For example, a maid who works in an ordinary home in India has a cell phone and thus has become very professional in her work ethics. A street vegetable vendor who has just a cart to carry his vegetables on, can now stand at a location momentarily and sell his produce. People of the neighborhood can call him on his cell phone and get fresh produce delivered to the door step. The same holds good for pharmacies and other home goods stores. All are practically a phone away. This is very unique feature of modern India.

In my younger days, we had a vegetable vendor coming to the house to sell the fresh produce placed in a basket on his head. Mother and I used to have a nice conversation with him and a social relationship was maintained with him as he was the only one bringing the produce to us and used to be on a credit basis for the month. Even today, we remember his name as Malka and his gimmicks while trying to sell the vegetables for the house. We practically grow up with this tradition. This was very common in the early days in India. Today, with the exorbitant rise in the prices of goods all over the globe, both the spouses have to go for work so that the children can be given good education and healthy life style. Yet at what cost are we providing all this, is the long term question?

Being a biological anthropologist, the other questions I will like answered through this open journal is the combination of personalized medicine and the ethic medicine. That is with all the molecular techniques we can see our deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) sequence in great details and see how we can use it for pharmacogenomics and at the same time see if an ethnic medicine can be used. Here, i find anthropologist can contribute great insight into these aspects as we look at each problem holistically.

I look forward to the new papers that will be published in Anthropology - Open Journal, a location in the digital world that will help us all to connect and interact at a global level. I commend the people involved in starting this open journal and wish that many people will share their research analysis on this digital platform.

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