



# NIAS Discussions

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDIES (NIAS)

Indian Institute of Science Campus, Bengaluru, 560012

## Development of Historical Understanding: Socio-Cultural Influences

Report of the NIAS Wednesday Discussion held on 13 July 2016

*Dr Shalini Dixit is an Assistant Professor at School of Social Sciences, NIAS. She works on Cultural and Cognitive Processes in appreciation of History, Critical aspects Educational Psychology, Cultural Processes, Social Psychology, and Gender Issues with Social Psychological perspective.*

### About NIAS Wednesday Discussions...

The NIAS faculty meets every Wednesday morning for academic discussions on various topics. As envisioned by Raja Rammanna, the Founder Director of NIAS, and pursued by his successors, the Wednesday meetings present the ongoing research, work-in-progress, and new/innovative ideas from the research studies of the faculty and the young researchers.

This Forum provides an excellent space to present one's work and also receive feedback and comments. Besides NIAS faculty and doctoral scholars others from outside the Institute also take part in these discussions.

Prof. Sangeetha Menon  
(smenon@nias.iisc.ernet.in)  
coordinates these meetings.

Development of historical understanding (HU) and the processes underlying such understanding are significant area of study with social and educational implications.

Understanding of history refers to the social and cognitive ability to process and make use of conveyed knowledge/information about historical events or situations. It involves ability to receive, comprehend, analyze and apply historical information, by using various social and cognitive skills. It has been observed (Dixit & Mohanty, 2009) that HU is not a unitary process, rather it is a cluster of various mental processes which follow somewhat divergent patterns of development.

Following four broad dimensions of HU were identified:

- **Temporality:** This dimension is related to the understanding of time, distance, and proximity of events in history and the relationship between past and history. This has two sub-dimensions namely, Awareness of difference between present and past and



Ability to link history to chronology.

- **Causality:** Causality refers to ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ modes of thinking about the causes of events or actions in history. In the present analysis, understanding of causality has been taken as: Ability to Relate Social Forces to an Event and Critical and Comparative analysis about events or phenomena by drawing upon imagination and to deduce inferences from the given facts about their relative importance in causing any event.
- **Methodology:** This dimension is related to various cognitive processes by which a reader or a writer of history engages himself/herself in the process of analyzing or appreciating history. It involves the following skills: Imagination of remote events and people; Perspective Taking; and Ability to Search for Patterns and Regularities in a series of events in history.
- **Understanding the historians’ job:** This dimension deals with the analysis of sources of historical reconstruction and understanding the relevance and contribution of historians’ mental processes in reconstructing history. More specifically, the abilities that can be seen under this dimension of HU are Ability to draw abstract concepts and information from concrete objects; Ability to analyze sources of history and Understanding history as interaction between Historian and his/her facts.

These dimensions were operationally defined and tested through an activity based test. The test included activities which resembled historical situation, like shorts stories or situations, and dealing with artefacts etc.

The studies in this context were an attempt to explore the HU in two different sub-cultural settings in India – the indigenous Santali cultural group, (officially listed in Indian



constitutional system as a Tribal community) and another non-tribal group located in a nearby urban area. Two studies were undertaken. First study aimed at tracing the developmental pattern of the HU in 9- to 14-year old children in the two sub-cultural settings. Second study was undertaken for a more focused analysis of the nature of HU among the Santali adults to understand the culture specific notions of tribal



## NIAS Wednesday Discussions

*Recent & Forthcoming*

### **Bangladesh and Myanmar: Rise of Radicalism**

by Ms. Sourina Bej & Ms. Albertina Nithya B

08 June 2016

### **India and Blue Economy: A Maritime Strategy for Growth**

by Mr. Adarsh Vijay

15 June 2016

### **Sister Nivedita: She gave her all to India**

By Prof. D.P. Sen Gupta

22 June 2016

### **Fishing Conflicts in the Palk Bay: Are the Indian Fishermen 'Carefully Careless'?**

By M Mayilvaganan

29 July 2016

### **Development of Historical Understanding: Socio-Cultural Influences**

By Dr Shalini Dixit

13 July 2016

### **The search for Odantapuri: Evidence from Landscape Archaeology**

By M B Rajani,

20 Jul 2016



children and adults.

In order to assess the HU of children in both the sub-cultural groups the Test of Historical Understanding (Dixit and Mohanty, 2009) was used. The test administration was followed by a detailed enquiry into children's notion of past and history. The HU of Santhal adults was explored through dialogues, group discussions and observations in their community.

The findings revealed that historical understanding is a continuous process which starts before the age of 9-10 and goes on developing after the age of 14. The dimensions which are relatively less abstract in nature, such as chronology, causality, imagination (for narrations), and understanding a historian's job, develop early by 9-10-years of age. It is important to mention here that by appreciating these dimensions of HU a child can easily understand the basic aspects of history. There is continuity from the 'basic understanding of past aspect of things' to the more sophisticated understanding of societal and psychological dynamics of history.



There were clear differences in the developmental pattern of different dimensions of HU across two cultural groups. This can be explained by the concept of “modularity” proposed by Cole (1992). It implies that different mental and physical exercises required in a culture, lead an individual to develop the respective cognitive modules better than other cognitive modules. Santali children reflected the



beliefs that most of the Santali adults showed. They have come to have a sort of disbelief in their community history, owing to a different representation of history in their textbooks. As was seen in the responses of children, adults also have not found Santali narratives in their text book leading to a belief that probably Santali past is nothing more than story.

Santali adults’ and children’s responses showed various culture specific features in their HU. Further, Santali adults’ historical understanding was found to be mediated by their level of schooling, with the highest educated (graduate and above) and the least educated (0 to 5 years of schooling) showing strongest adherence to their community history. This reveals the mediating effect of education and culture on formation of historical understanding.

