

Obituary: F. G. Bailey (1924–2020)



F. G. Bailey

Source: Edward Simpson

I first met Freddy at his home in the hills outside San Diego in 2011. The smell of English-breakfast bacon wafted through the pine-fresh California air. He was warm, welcoming and interested that I was interested in the research he had undertaken in India in the 1950s. We called that research project *The Ark Royal*, a name given to us by Freddy, who recalled watching the launch of the vessel at the Cammell Laird shipyard in Birkenhead in the North West of England in 1937. The ship was an engineering wonder of the world—and Freddy laughed, ‘it was so complicated that it sunk’.

Flanking the yard outside his house stood his workshop and office. In the workshop, he had made furniture; in the office, he had crafted books about India and many more on political anthropology. There were boxes of fieldnotes and albums of photographs from the 1950s, a period of great significance in his memory and for his style. The characters he had met at

Contributions to Indian Sociology (2020): 1–3

SAGE Publications Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington DC/
Melbourne

DOI: 10.1177/0069966720976507

that time in India lived in his thoughts and writings many decades later in the hills above San Diego.

‘Freddy’ was born in 1924, saw active military service towards the end of the Second World War, read classics at Oxford, wrote a PhD at Manchester with Max Gluckman and Elizabeth Colson, taught at SOAS University of London between 1956 and 1964, was one of the founders of anthropology at the University of Sussex and moved to University of California, San Diego, in the early 1970s, from where his career as an anthropologist of politics really took off.

As an ‘Indianist’, Freddy conducted fieldwork in Orissa, India, between 1952 and 1955 and again in 1959. He quickly developed a distinctive ethnographic voice and style, openly taking on Louis Dumont and David Pocock for their ‘India is one’ sloganeering (Bailey, 1959). Bailey thought the Dumont–Pocock project too narrow in its understanding of sociology, which he interpreted to be a ‘sociology of values’, a form of ‘culturology’.

To recount the now-well-known formula: Dumont and Pocock distinguished between what people themselves had to say about their own society and a higher level of abstract organisational concepts provided by the anthropologist. The ‘India is one’ slogan was a ‘Procrustean Bed’ to which Bailey objected on empirical and ideological terms: the emphasis on Hinduism excluded other religious and political ideas; what was the need to prove the country was united by values?

Bailey’s most sustained criticism saw the insertion of his first-hand (and then recent) experiences in the village of Bisipara in Highland Orissa in the early 1950s into the intellectual edifice the founding editors of *Contributions* had engineered in Oxford. They had argued that intra- and inter-village relationships were subordinate to the universal values of caste and kinship. Bailey cited straightforward examples in which Bisiparans drew upon the village as a profound and sincere category of understanding. In his view, also, the exclusive focus on value also made the pair blind to the churn and legacy of empires and humdrum economic and political concerns.

Bailey wrote three seminal monographs based on this research, of which *Caste and the Economic Frontier* (1957) is most read. Taken together, however, the trilogy forms a greater project describing and analysing social change at the level of the village, caste and region in the heady years after Independence. In the 1990s, Freddy revisited his Bisipara research with three further monographs. These are gloomy and masterful descriptions of

the unspoken values and morals he witnessed in India in the 1950s. I have read these books many times, back and forth, alongside Bailey's fieldnotes (which are now open access in electronic form at the SOAS library). The questions Bailey asked stood the test of time. His anthropology placed social action and economy over value and religion—an approach echoed in his criticisms of the founders of this journal.

Looking back at the broadside Bailey offered Dumont and Pocock reminds us that current struggles in India about claims to universal value in the face of diversity and inequality have long been played out in the pages of this journal.

As his work matured, he developed the themes he had first encountered in the fields around Bisipara though broader explorations of democracy, equality and the analysis of how people claimed and maintained power. Freddy's work on political anthropology made humbug and trickery objects of enquiry. Early on in his writing, he identified 'economic man' as a key character. As the years went by, economics turned to the politics of university committees, elections and rhetoric. Stratagems and spoils and bluster and lies became his fascination as he stripped bare—through studied descriptive techniques—the methods people use to get what they want.

Freddy lived a long and productive life and made an enduring contribution to the sociology of India. One of the things he repeated to me was that I should always remember that 'old age is not for wimps'. He wanted to outlive his wife Mary so that she would not suffer alone. Mary died in 2015. The Baileys are survived by two children, John and Myra.

REFERENCE

Bailey, F. G. 1959. 'For a Sociology of India?' *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 3: 88–101.

*Director, SOAS South Asia Institute,
London, UK
E-mail: es7@soas.ac.uk*

EDWARD SIMPSON