# ANTHRO BULLETIN

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ANTHROPOS INDIA FOUNDATION

ANTHROPOS BOOKS

A digital magazine that celebrates cultural diversities of India.

## ABOUT ANTHROPOS INDIA FOUNDATION

Founded in 2011, Anthropos India Foundation (AIF) promotes the discipline of Anthropology, its philosophy and its methods to engage in applied and action research. Our work seeks to address issues of local communities through a bottom-up approach that is unique to their cultures and people. We conduct community- based research rooted in local knowledge systems, local culture and ecology to inform policy initiatives and drive transformational impact. AIF also conducts workshops, trainings and advocacy on various issues, especially on children. AIF promotes Visual Anthropology through vibrant, authentic, meaningful ethnographic films and photo documentation.

## ABOUT *ANTHRO BULLETIN*

Starting from January 2025, AIF's monthly Newsletter has been upgraded into a monthly digital magazine called ***Anthro Bulletin***, with a renewed focus and energy. As anthropologists, we have always been keen on covering the diversity of our country from various perspectives. Over time, we have explored a wide range of topics, and seeing the richness of the emerging content, we have transformed the Newsletter into something more appropriate and culturally stimulating. From now on, our monthly ***Anthro Bulletin*** will feature articles on themes related to Indian art, crafts, culture, and festivals from a unique, anthropological perspective, highlighting the country's rich diversity and traditions besides sharing the regular news updates. We are also excited to introduce a new column ***'Young Scholars: Notes from the Field.'*** This column features fieldwork, travelogues, or PhD-related work of young and bright scholars, providing them a platform to share their valuable insights and experiences here as well. Please write to us if you want to submit your article!

**We also welcome you to share high-resolution, portrait-size, self-clicked pictures of cultural events, traditions, and festivals to be featured on our magazine's cover page every month.** Please note that the selection of articles and pictures is at the discretion of our editorial team and is based on several factors, including how well the submissions align with our objectives.

All submissions can be emailed to **aif.newsletter2025@gmail.com.**
We also welcome sponsors who would like to support this magazine.



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# Cockfight in Bali

Dr. Sunita Reddy, Founder-Chair, Anthropos India Foundation

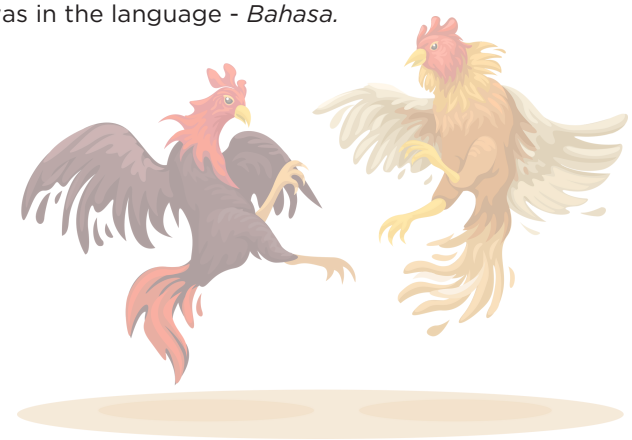
Dear readers,
Becoming an anthropologists has lots of advantages. You appreciate other cultures and wonder how cultures can be so similar thousands of miles apart. My recent visit to Bali, where I by chance got an opportunity to witness cock fight, bringing back my masters in Anthropology classroom lectures alive.

The moment we landed in Bali, I remembered Clifford Geertz, book 'Interpretation of Cultures' and his narration about Balinese Cockfight. I was just sharing this with my dad, when we saw a congregation of some young and old men in Ubud for cockfight. I was excited and so was my dad as he had seen so many Cockfight, '*Kodi Pandyalu*' in Andhra.

I wonder what is the connection between Bali and Andhra about cockfighting. Both are popular traditional sport. In Andhra Pradesh, it is held especially during the *Sankranti* festival in January. The sport is deeply rooted in the culture of the region, particularly in coastal districts like East Godavari, West Godavari, Krishna.

Cockfighting, known as *tajen* in Bali, is a traditional practice deeply rooted in Balinese culture and Hindu rituals. It has both religious and social significance but is also controversial due to its association with gambling and animal cruelty. In Bali cockfighting is often performed as part of *Tabuh Rah* (meaning "spilling blood"), a ritual sacrifice in Hindu ceremonies. According to Balinese Hindu beliefs, the bloodshed is an offering to spirits to restore cosmic balance and purify the environment from negative energies. This is commonly seen in temple ceremonies, such as *Odalan* (temple anniversaries) and other purification rites.

It is not just a sport but a festival tradition, with villages and towns organizing large-scale fights. It involves betting and gambling. We could witness that in Bali, though couldn't make sense of their conversations as it was in the language - *Bahasa.*



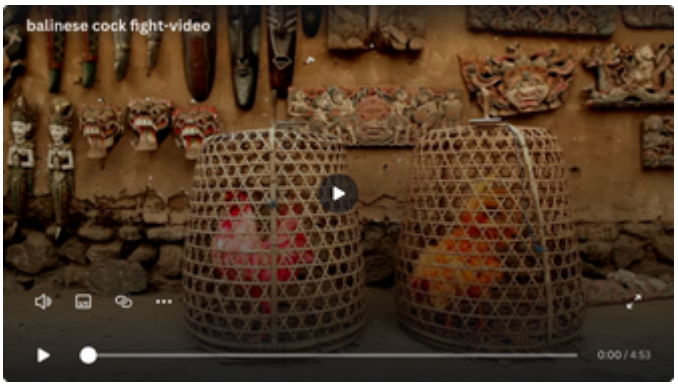
For cockfighting, special breeds of roosters are raised and fed well months before the fight. It was interesting to see how the blades were kept in a pouch and the guy took one after the other to match the size with the cock feet. He then tied it meticulously around the thumb nail with red thread, as one can see in the video (link given below).

Similar use of Knives (*Kodi Kathalu*) are used in Andhra. These sharp knives make the fights more lethal and this practice makes the sport dangerous and controversial.

Though, cockfighting is illegal in India, under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960, and the Supreme Court has upheld the ban. Whereas, in Bali, *tajen* is culturally significant, it is also criticized for animal cruelty, as the fights can be brutal and often end in the death of one or both the birds. Animal rights advocates oppose the practice, arguing that it causes unnecessary suffering. The Indonesian government has made efforts to curb illegal cockfighting, but enforcement remains inconsistent due to its deep cultural roots.

As we can note, in both places, it continues unofficially, as part of old traditional sport with cultural significance. Often the authorities turn a blind eye due to political and local influences. Recent developments by the animal rights activists frequently raise concerns about cruelty and gambling. Despite the ban, events are conducted locally.

It's a dilemma for the anthropologists to go with cultural moorings or with legal animal Rights perspective.




**To enjoy the Balinese Cockfight, click here!**

## Eco-Spiritualism: Wisdom of Ancient Vedic Ecological Ethos

Prof. (retd.) Shalina Mehta, Department of Anthropology, Panjab University

*"The entire Universe is to be looked upon as the Lord"* - Isha Upanishad.

Seeing the enthusiasm with which young interns at AIF and research scholars are writing about the ancient heritage of India, on an instinct, I also decided to have a conversation with our readers on foundations of Indian ancient ecological ethos and accompanying celebrations as festivals and rituals. Centuries of political subjugation and colonizers' deliberate attempt to destroy our civilizational history and power of our *Vedic* philosophy resulted in an interregnum, compelling a discourse questioning scientific rigour of our *Vedic* epistemology, cultural ethos, and rituals. In 1973, after Arne Naess's much-celebrated article 'The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary,' followed by Bron Raymond Taylor's 1995 publication 'Ecological Resistance Movements: The Global Emergence of Radical and Popular Environmentalism,' shifted attention to genesis of Earth First, that significance of *Vedic* Philosophy rooted in Nature and Spiritualism rekindled hopes for the survival of biosphere. In the *Vedic* texts of *Atharvaveda*, an entire *sutra* called *Bhumi Sukta* (the hymn to the Earth) is dedicated to Mother Earth. It talks about living in harmony with biophysical and temporal aspects of the Earth.

सत्यं बृहदृतमुग्रं दीक्षा तपो ब्रह्म यज्ञः पृथिवीं धारयन्ति ।
सा नो भूतस्य भव्यस्य पत्न्युरुं लोकं पृथिवी नः कृणोतु ॥१॥

Ancient *Vedic* texts not only provided the basis for conservation ethics, but also elucidated strategies for the preservation of the finite resources. Several *Sutras* in various *Puranas* describe the proper construction of temples, tanks, and wells. Chapter 58 of the *Matsya Purana* and Chapter 64 of the *Agni Purana* prescribes rituals for making offerings aimed at preserving water bodies. The *Parasargrhyasutra* recommends aquatic species such as tortoises and fish to be introduced into lakes. Certain verses from the *Bhavisya Purana* ascertain the need for maintaining water purity. The *Taithriya Arnayak* (16.6.77) prohibits water contamination-just to cite few examples. Essence of our ancient philosophy is to live in harmony with nature that made India in A.L.Basham's words, "one of the oldest continuous civilizations of the world" (1957, The Wonder that was India). He further adds *Sanskaras* are festivals that '*relate to cyclical life of nature*'. It is this synergy that makes environment sustainable.

Radical environmentalism also brought back focus on religious ideology arguing that monotheistic religions were instrumental in separating nature from Anthropos.

This resulted in the separation of science from spirituality accelerating exploitation of limited natural resources. Hubris of science brought us at the brink of climate crisis caused by anthropogenic factors. Ashish Kothari a well-known ecologist and eco-activist eloquently summaries it: "for a civilization like India oneness with nature is part of philosophy and to an extent even daily practice. And thus, it is difficult for us to share Cartesian worldview that renders ourselves as the masters and possessors of nature".

Return to eco-spirituality by western environmentalists and philosophers is an acknowledgement of power of eastern philosophies and strong relationship that exists between nature, environment, and culture as is embodied in *Vedic* texts.

Anthropologist Julian Steward coined the term "cultural ecology" in the year 1937 to understand the process of adaptation by a society to its environment. For over a century or more, ethnographers have recorded cultural myths that make certain objects sacred and associate these with taboos and totems to protect them from human destruction. Several fascinating tales associated with myths of origin and conservation are part of every ethnographer's repository. These exhibits deep understanding of indigenous communities with "*prakriti* and preservation".

*Vedic* philosophy paved the pathway for eco-sustainability by intertwining spiritual ethos with rituals and ensuring its practice by every believer. West now wants to co-opt it calling for 'nature-based ritualizing' (Seed,1994); iterating connectedness between the science of ecology and spirituality to explain the concept of eco-spirituality (Bonfiglio,2012). In essence it is the recognition of interdependence of species within the biosphere and incorporating it as part of one's consciousness-a sentiment poignantly expressed by Australian Earth first activist John Seed: "I am the rainforest recently emerged into consciousness, defending myself".

# Bhutni Island: A lesser-known area with hardships

*Chandra Shekher Upadhayay*

*Indu Bhaumik*

***Bhutni chor*- Grappling with river curse:**

*Bhutni chor* is an obscure area of West Bengal's Malda district. In fact, it is an island in the heart of *Ganga*, surrounded by river *Ganga* and its tributary *Fulohor*. This area is inhabited mostly by *Kisan*, *Chai Mandal, Bind* and *Khotta* Muslims, among which *Kisans* constitute the largest ethnic group, followed by a religious ethnicity, *Khotta* Muslims. Majority of these ethnic groups are expert in agriculture, few are engaged in fishing. *Kisan* as mentioned by the second author in her PhD thesis as *Kisan* claimants, are going through a social identity crisis. This almost unexplored community claims their affiliations with the *Kisan* Tribe, which is currently a situation of political maneuvering. Both the community and the area are ignored by the government because of geographical and political turmoil.

The nomenclature *Bhutni* is ascribed to "the land of ghosts", which indirectly states that no sane individual can handle this harsh conditions. The troublesome geography contributes to the nomenclature. The community living in this area are inhibiting here since ancient times, probably their deep connection with their roots do not let them to migrate, or even when they are forced to migrate (due to *Ganga* erosion), they rehabilitate again in the same zone. Ultimately, the inhabitants are the only people who can live and thrive here. In local parlance the area is known as "Andaman of Malda".

Despite this, the abundance of water influences the economic growth of the place through heavy agricultural production throughout the season. The first impressions while visiting the site may felt it as "boon of economy" but in reality the Holy *Ganga* acts as a curse by taking lives and destroying human settlements heavily.

Every rainy season, the water level rises due to heavy rainfall in and around Malda and further influences by the dam. Earlier, the region endured prolonged periods of flooding. The area was waterlogged for around four months, year prior to the construction of a temporary dam. Lives were severely disturbed by the flood situation. Although the dam initially offered some relief, but whenever the season faced heavy rainfall, the inhabitants were scared. Diet was changed during that period which resulted undernutrition among all age group – from children to adults. Additionally, they were burdened with stress of occupational loss. During 2023 , the heavy force of the *Ganga* resulted in the submergence of several villages on *Bhutni* Island. In 2024, the island was again completely submerged for over a month. The prolonged waterlogging has severely impacted human settlements, leading to food shortages and increased psychological stress for the residents. The *Bhutni* island is situated in the lower course of the *Ganga*. The soil erosion is a common phenomenon here, which grapple acres of land every year.

Several participants stated their horror stories of their experience of how *Ganga* engulfed their land. These victims could not grab anything in the emergency but only could run and save their lives. They experienced loss of lives, cattle, residential and agricultural lands. These people had to restart their life every now and then. The ongoing floods, erosion, and displacement have profoundly affected the health of those living on *Bhutni* Island.

In 2024, the people were unable to save their houses, lands, livestock, assets because of this immense flood submerging them up to a level of ground floor; the inhabitants had to move to open roof. Overall, this led to the huge destruction. On the other hand, in the name of relief fund a political play was continuously operating, which also burdened their lives heavily. Every year given few agencies are trying to take some steps, somehow these solutions are not worth the cost of their livelihood. As majority of the people are agriculturist, jute is produced in the rainy season which actually needs heavy processing, which is also labour intensive. Submerging for the whole working season leads to potential time and agricultural loss. Jute - the golden fabric is a cash crop which provide the agriculturist with moderate earnings. So, earning throughout a season got devastated. The government is trying to vacate that place. Here an ethical question arises, what are the alternate system after vacating that place, and how they will manage to live. Relocation and rehabilitation programs for marginalized groups will pose significant challenges due to sheer size of the affected population. Additionally, alternative occupational problem persists. These ethnic groups are devoid of economic capital to navigate the complexities. Hence, a careful planning is needed to help the people who are burdened with so much problem. Definitely, this a duty of anthropologists to help the inhabitants to find a sustainable solution and offer a better living.

The situation of 2024 in Bhutni (Inside: The area of Bhutni chor)

# Petroglyphs of Leh, Union Territory of Ladakh, India

*By Anil Kumar Sukumaran*

This paper is purely a piece of professional interest emerged as a byproduct of my field visit to Nimoo Bazgo HEPS Dam and Chutak Barrage in Leh-Kargil for preparing Emergency Action Plan for Hydropower Dams. After visiting this site I developed interest in geoanthropology and I am documenting this in my narration (travelogue).

Petroglyphs are generally labelled as '*rock art*' or '*rock carvings*' which are found across the globe. Etymologically, the word *"petroglyph"* is derived from the French word *"pétroglyphe,"* which in turn is borrowed from the Ancient Greek words *"petra"* meaning *"rock"* and *"gluphē"* meaning *"carved work"*. Rock carvings recalls us of Indus Valley Civilization and stone ages of development. In the opinion of Boivin[1] (2004) Rock art in South Asia exhibits a wide range of geographical and chronological distribution. Rock art studies in the sub-continent have generally failed to contribute to an understanding of the South Asian Past or rock art production in general.

**History of this tradition:** The oldest known are more than 40,000 years old (art of the Upper Paleolithic) and found in the caves in the district of Maros (Sulawesi, Indonesia). The oldest are often constructed from hand stencils and simple geometric shapes.

The ancient Puebloans created most of the petroglyphs. These ancestors of today's Pueblo Indians lived in the area around the Rio Grande for more than 1,500 years. Around 1300 AD, the population of the Puebloans increased and new settlements were formed to accommodate this growth.

Native-American pictographs and petroglyphs are symbols or drawings that stand for words or have specific meanings. Pictographs are drawn onto a rock surface with natural pigments, and petroglyphs are carved or scraped directly into the rock surface with tools.

**How it is made:** Petroglyphs are made by pecking directly on the rock surface using a stone chisel and/or by beating the chisel with a hammerstone. Also, it could be carved by pecking the stone surface using another handy sharp wedge stone. Usually, the designs or message is haphazard which have no scale. Due to the percussion the desert varnish or patina on the surface of the rock was chipped off, the lighter rock underneath was exposed, creating the petroglyph.

**Forms of pictures and figures Depicted**

Petroglyphs and pictographs have lines and shapes that may form recognizable motifs, such as anthropomorphic figures, animals, cosmological phenomena, and symbols. They may depict exactly what you think, or symbolize ideas or traditions. No one living today is sure what they are, or what they mean. Some of the scenes in these carvings represent maps of the local terrain, religious rituals, hunting scenes, and scenes from everyday life (Boivin, 2004). Petroglyphs demonstrate that humans may have been using icons for many years to communicate and retell events of the local history and traditions.

**Petroglyphs found in other parts of the World**

The World's Largest Rock Art Petroglyph - Dabous Giraffe Carvings in Niger Africa. The two life-size giraffe petroglyphs, known as the Dabous giraffe, are the largest known animal carvings in the world.


Petroglyphs in Leh are found in the foothills of Alchi Village, which is a protected archaeological site (photo-1).

Petroglyphs reported in India are reported from the Konkan region of Maharashtra and Goa is home to ancient petroglyphs, some of which date back 12,000 years. In Maharashtra, they are found in locations like Kasheli, Barsu, and Ratnagiri. Interestingly, these petroglyphs were discovered not too long ago. Bovin reports many rock art sites from south Indian states.

**Purpose of Petroglyphs**

These images are a valuable record of cultural expression and hold profound spiritual significance for contemporary Native Americans and for the descendants of the early Spanish settlers. Petroglyphs are powerful cultural symbols that reflect the complex societies and religions of the surrounding tribes or a sect of society. Petroglyphs are central to the monument's sacred landscape where traditional ceremonies still take place. The context of each image is extremely important and integral to its meaning.

Petroglyphs are powerful cultural symbols that reflect the complex societies and religions of the surrounding tribes. Petroglyphs are central to the monument's sacred landscape where traditional ceremonies still take place. The context of each image is extremely important and integral to its meaning.

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**Picture:** The stone carvings are available on the scattered rocks

**Picture:** The carvings mostly depict Buddhist pagodas and stupas

**Picture:** The carvings mostly depict Buddhist pagodas and stupas with some writings

# Echoes of the Mountains: Victoria Cross Darwan Singh Sangrahalaya

*By Kazi Roson Mustafa Hasan, AIF*

As the sun sets over Lansdowne's pine-covered hills, long shadows stretch across the old stone walls of the Victoria Cross Darwan Singh Sangrahalaya. Inside these walls, time stands still caught between past and eternity. This isn't just a museum filled with objects; it's a keeper of memories, whispering stories in hushed tones, preserving the heartbeat of a culture that runs through these ancient mountains like the sacred rivers cutting through valleys below.

**A Soldier's Dream, A People's Memory**

This museum isn't just bricks and mortar—it's a guardian of dreams. Named after Darwan Singh Negi, who earned the Victoria Cross during the bitter winter of 1914, it embodies the spirit of sacrifice that has defined generations of Garhwali soldiers. Walking these hallways feels like tracing the rough hands of grandfathers who once left these mountains to fight in distant lands, carrying only their courage and memories of home.

The military photographs on the walls show young men with eyes full of both innocence and determination—boys who became legends, sons who became immortal. Their uniforms, now yellowed with age and preserved behind glass, seem to still hold the warmth of those who wore them. You can almost hear their laughter in the barracks, their quiet prayers before battle, their promises to return to these beloved mountains.

**Treasures of Everyday Life**

Beyond the medals and souvenirs lies a collection that brings tears to elderly visitors and fascinates the young. Here are the everyday objects that filled their ancestors' homes—items once so common they were hardly noticed, yet now deeply missed. The *Kangulla*, that wooden comb your grandmother would run through your hair while singing old songs. Each gentle stroke brought stories of mountain goddesses with flowing hair; tales passed from mother to daughter while fingers worked through tangles. How many romances began with a young man giving a hand-carved *Kangulla* to the girl he loved? How many prayers were whispered over these combs as they were packed in a daughter's wedding trunk?

The *Takuli* sits quietly on display, but memory echoes with it clicking sound that once formed the rhythm of winter nights. Mothers and grandmothers would sit in a row beside the hearth, hands moving in practiced rhythm, spinning stories as effortlessly as they spun yarn. That sweater keeping you warm wasn't just clothing—it was their love that made tangible, their protection woven into every thread.

Remember the *Agela*? Today's children may never know the magic of creating fire with their own hands —that wonderful moment when smoke turns to flame under a grandfather's patient guidance. The *Agela* remembers. It recalls how survival once depended not on flipping a switch but on knowledge passed through generations, how families gathered around its precious warmth during harsh Himalayan winters, sharing stories that kept their heritage alive.

**The Soundtrack of Our Ancestors**

The glass cases can't contain the music that once filled village gatherings. The *Bhankuri* may be silent now but close your eyes and you might hear its haunting melody announcing a wedding procession winding through mountain paths. When an elderly Garhwali sees this instrument, tears often well up—not for the object itself, but for the vanished world it represents, when entire villages would celebrate together, when the sound of this flute meant joy was approaching.

The *Hudki*, *Damaun* and *Gaindi* no longer echo through the valleys, but their memory awakens muscle memory in those who danced to their rhythms. These instruments didn't just play music—they created connection. Every *Damaun* beat synchronized heartbeats across generations, every *Hudki* rhythm connected dancers to ancestors who moved to the same patterns centuries ago. These weren't performances but prayers, not entertainment but offerings of shared emotions too deep for words alone.

**Measures of Time Gone By**

Perhaps most touching are the measuring cups—the *Parathi*, *Patha*, *Sheri*, *Ganjali*, and *Kandi*— humble

items that measure life's necessities. The *Parathi*, with wood smoothed by countless hands, didn't just hold milk, curd and ghee; it preserved morning rituals—grandmothers churning butter at dawn, offering fresh milk to household deities, carefully pouring ghee onto sacred fires.

These measuring bowls speak of trust and community economics, before plastic and mass production. The *Patha* and *Sheri* recall marketplaces where deals were sealed with just a nod, where grain quantities marked seasonal abundance, where sharing meant no family went hungry while others had plenty. (Four *Sheri* makes one *Patha*)

**A Heritage Held in Trust**

Walking through this museum means traveling not through a collection of artifacts but through collective memory. For older Garhwalis, each object triggers waves of sensory memories—the smell of pine smoke from hearths where the *Agela* lit fires, the taste of buttermilk kept in a *Parathi*, the feel of wool processed by the *Takuli* against skin during cold winters. For younger generations, increasingly drawn to cities in the plains and valleys, these objects bridge the widening gap between past and present. A young Garhwali soldier on leave might stand before a *Bhankuri* display and suddenly recall the tune his grandfather played, connecting him to traditions older than written history.

In a world rushing blindly forward, the Victoria Cross Darwan Singh Sangrahalaya offers a haven of remembrance. It reminds us that progress doesn't require forgetting, that honoring what came before strengthens rather than weakens our future. Each relic whispers quietly: "Remember who you are. Remember where you came from. Carry us in your heart, even as your feet take you far away."

These aren't relics of a dying culture, but seeds of identity preserved through winter, waiting for spring. In their presence, we're all called home to the mountains that shaped us, to the wisdom that sustained us, to the heritage that will outlive us all.

Note: Photography was forbidden inside the sangrahalaya.

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*Victoria Cross Darwan Singh Sangrahalaya*

# Bittersweet Beginnings: Rajbanshi Rituals of Choitra Sankranti and Pohela Boishakh

*By Debi Saha, AIF*

India's cultural tapestry is woven with countless festivals—each a vibrant thread reflecting regional traditions, agricultural rhythms, and spiritual beliefs. One such shared rhythm is the celebration of the New Year in the month of April, a time deeply tied to the end of the harvest season in India. As the fields are cleared and the granaries fill, communities across the country welcome a new beginning—ushering in prosperity, gratitude, and hope.

In Indian culture, the New Year is not universally celebrated on January 1st but follows traditional calendars, often lunar or solar, marking the start of a fresh agricultural cycle. This period is known by different names in different regions: *Bohag Bihu* in Assam, *Baisakhi* in Punjab, *Vishu* in Kerala, and *Gudi Padwa* in Maharashtra, each with distinct customs yet unified in spirit. In Bengal, *Poila Boishakh* (linked with the harvest festival *Nabanna*) brings its own set of rituals and feasts. Beyond these widely celebrated festivals are the rich, lesser-known traditions—like the *Rajbanshi* community's observance of *Choitra Sankranti*, locally referred to as *Bisuwa* or *Bishuba*. These regional New Year celebrations not only mark the passage of time but also reflect the deep connection between people, land, and livelihood in India's diverse cultural landscape.

**Bitter Herbs and Cleansing Rituals:**

Some believe the word *Bishuba* derives from *Vishubha*, Sanskrit for the spring equinox. Others trace it to *bish*, meaning "*poison*"—referring to the bitter herbs central to the celebration. On this day, *Rajbanshi* families prepare a special dish of local medicinal plants —*Brihati*, *Basak* (Adhatoda vasica), *pat shak* (jute spinach), neem, *keorar kanta*, *kanshicha, katrir ful*, and *bishkutuli*. These are first offered to deities like *Manosha* (snake goddess) or *Shiva* and then eaten as *prasad*.

The act is both spiritual and medicinal—a cleansing ritual to protect against seasonal illnesses. Symbolically, the first bite is chewed and spat out, casting away evil and misfortune. Onion, garlic, and thorny branches (including from the *Mayna* tree) are tied and hung in every room to guard against negativity in the coming year.

On *Bisuwa*, meat—often mutton—is customarily prepared, possibly echoing the old *Shikar Parab, the*

hunting festival. The feast celebrates endings and new beginnings, community, and shared identity. Families also reserve a portion of cooked rice for the next morning—the first day of *Boishakh*. This fermented rice, *Choiter Panta*, carries the memory of the past year into the freshness of the new

***Mashan Baba*:** Folk Faith Beyond Borders: In places like *Gosanimari* (Dinhata), *Pohela Boishakh* marks the beginning of *Mashan Baba* worship, lasting the entire month. The final day features idol renewal and a village fair. *Rajbanshi*, Bengali, and even Muslim communities join in, offering *doi-chira*, sweets, and sacrificial items like *shol mach*, goats, or pigeons—especially when a vow is fulfilled.

**Myths vary:** There are multiple local mythologies around *Mashan Baba*. Some believe he was born from the sweat of *Maa Kali*. Others believe that during the reign of King *Kamteshwar* of Kamtapur, certain attempts to break the fortified walls (*gaur*) of the kingdom awakened a powerful spirit—*Mashan Baba*—who demanded that place be consecrated as sacred grounds or *mashan* than. The *Gaurkata Mashan* Temple—now one of the most important shrines in the region—is believed to be born from this lore. Locals say there are 16 to 19 forms of *Mashan Baba*, such as *Jolua Mashan, Golakata Mashan* and *Tosha Mashan*, all considered spiritual brothers.

**Possession, Protection, and Parochial *Shiva*:** The fear of *Mashan Dhora* (spirit possession) runs deep. Children are warned not to leave drawn lines in the soil. If possessed, they're taken to *Ojhas* (folk healers), who perform rituals with *jal para* (sacred water). Even today, my mother insists we change clothes after visiting the temple—an act of protection. *Mashan Baba* is seen by many as a localized form of *Shiva*—what scholars might call parochialization. Unlike Sanskritic worship, here he is a deity of the people: raw, emotional, and rooted in everyday suffering, healing, and survival.

**Culture vs. *Dal-Chawal*:** These traditions, however, are fading. From Cooch Behar and Alipurduar to Lower Assam and parts of Bangladesh, variations exist, but the rituals no longer thrive in every corner. Modernization, migration, and job scarcity have shifted priorities. *Rajbanshi* youth, facing land fragmentation and unemployment, often leave West Bengal in search of work.

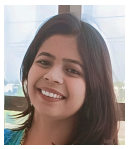
With most rituals traditionally led by men in this patriarchal society, their absence weakens continuity. Small efforts to preserve language and customs continue, but the future feels uncertain.

Today, the *Rajbanshi* community stands at a crossroads—torn between culture and *dal-chawal* (daily sustenance). While elders hold on to rituals, the young navigate a world that demands cultural compromise for economic survival.

In the bitter herbs of *Bisuwa*, the chants of *Mashan Baba*, and the cool taste of *Choiter Panta*, echoes of a fading past linger. These rituals—though quietly slipping away—speak of resilience, shared memory, and an enduring desire to stay rooted in the soil of North Bengal.

**Idols of Gaur Kata Mashan**

# Prof. Kamal K. Misra



*Interview by Saba Farhin*

Prof. Kamal K. Misra, Ph.D., is an eminent Indian anthropologist with over four decades of distinguished academic, research, and administrative experience. He currently holds the position of Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at KISS Deemed to be University (KISS-DU), Bhubaneswar. He formerly served as Vice-Chancellor of Utkal University of Culture and has held several prominent positions, including Director of the Anthropological Survey of India, Kolkata, and Director of the National Museum of Mankind (Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya), Bhopal.

Prof. Misra has made significant contributions to cultural and social anthropology, with a deep focus on Ecological Anthropology, Linguistic Anthropology, Anthropological Theory and Museum Anthropology. He has authored and edited several impactful works, including Traditional Knowledge in Contemporary Societies, Text Book of Anthropological Linguistics, Gendering Material Culture, Recent Studies on Indian Women, The Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups in India, among others. He has also been involved with national-level policy-making, serving on the High-Level Committee on Scheduled Tribes of India.

In addition to his administrative leadership, Prof. Misra has held academic positions in prestigious institutions in India and abroad, including Austin College in Texas, USA; University of Bergen, Norway, etc. He has served as Dean, School of Social Sciences, at the University of Hyderabad and was a Senior Fellow at the ICSSR-NKCCDS in Bhubaneswar. He is a Life/Founding Member of many anthropological associations/societies in India and abroad, including Anthropos India Foundation (AIF).

A dedicated scholar and mentor, Prof. Misra continues to inspire generations of anthropologists through his writings, lectures, and advisory roles. His work bridges the gap between academia and grassroots realities, reaffirming the relevance of anthropology in contemporary India. His legacy lies in his commitment to indigenous communities, education, and the advancement of social science research.

**What initially drew you to the field of anthropology, and how has your journey evolved over the years?**

Upon completing my Bachelor of Science (Honours) degree in 1974 from B.J.B. College, Bhubaneswar, my understanding of Anthropology as a discipline—and the career opportunities it offered—was limited. In search of a postgraduate program that could provide viable employment prospects, I visited the Utkal University campus at Vani Vihar, Bhubaneswar. Coming from a lower middle-class family of educators, securing a stable job—ideally in teaching—was my foremost concern.

During this search, I discovered that the Master of Science program in Anthropology included several biological components, such as Human Evolution and Genetics, areas with which I was already somewhat familiar. Encouraged by this alignment with my academic background, I applied for admission, was selected, and went on to pursue the program, eventually choosing to specialize in Social Anthropology.

I was deeply impressed by the student-friendly environment of the Department of Anthropology at Utkal University. The department was staffed by esteemed faculty members, including Professors L.K. Mahapatra, Usha Deka, Uma Charan Mohanty, N.K. Behura, K.C. Tripathy, P.D. Prasad Rao, and B.K. Behera, among others. In addition to formal classroom instruction, students had unrestricted access to a dedicated Textbook Library located within one of the departmental halls. This space served as an academic hub where we could engage in independent study and collaborative discussions beyond regular class hours. My senior peers played a pivotal role in nurturing my interest and guiding my understanding of Anthropology, particularly its humanistic dimensions. I vividly recall occasions when some of us would remain in the library hall overnight, engrossed in study sessions and spirited intellectual exchanges.

My true engagement with Anthropology began during my Master's dissertation fieldwork, a 30-day research trip undertaken with my classmates to study the *Juang* community—a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) residing in the Kendujhar District of Odisha. This formative experience, conducted under the super-

-vision of Professor N.K. Behura and Dr. B.K. Behera, marked a turning point in my understanding of the discipline. It was then that I grasped the essence of Anthropology as a field that intricately weaves together scientific inquiry with a profound concern for humanity. At the time, one of the central anthropological debates revolved around the "homogeneous" versus "segmented" nature of tribal societies. Marshall Sahlins' seminal work Stone Age Economics (1972) posited that tribal political systems were fundamentally segmentary and hierarchically structured. Within this intellectual context, Professor Behura assigned me the topic "Social Differentiation among the *Juang*" for my M.Sc. dissertation. The findings from this field study were eventually published in Man in India in 1991.

Subsequently, I enrolled in the M.Phil. program at the Centre for Social Systems, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, as Utkal University had not yet initiated an M.Phil. program in Anthropology. At JNU, I had the privilege of being mentored by eminent scholars such as Professors Yogendra Singh, T.K. Oommen, R.K. Jain, C.N. Venugopal, K.L. Sharma, and M.N. Panini, among others. Their rigorous teaching and intellectual guidance played a pivotal role in shaping my capacity for critical thinking on a wide array of social issues.

I returned to Utkal University to pursue and successfully complete my Ph.D. under the expert guidance of Prof. L.K. Mahapatra. He encouraged me to focus my research on the *Khampti* community of Arunachal Pradesh. Conducting fieldwork in the *Khampti* villages of the Lohit Valley was a significant challenge, as it required me to immerse myself in their culture, learn their language, and adapt to their way of life. This deep engagement proved invaluable in the successful completion of my doctoral studies. At a crucial stage in my research journey, the Anthropological Survey of India provided essential support by awarding me a Senior Research Fellowship (Cultural), enabling me to continue and complete my doctoral work.

For my post-doctoral research, I joined the University of Kent at Canterbury (UK), which was then a leading and vibrant centre for studies in Environmental Anthropology in Europe. Under the mentorship of Professor Roy Ellen, I was encouraged to explore the intersections of culture, environment, and development. His guidance greatly influenced the trajectory of my academic interests. Since then, my research has primarily focused on Ecological Anthropology, alongside continued work in Linguistic Anthropology.

I began my academic career as a Lecturer in Social Anthropology at Utkal University. After nearly eleven years of service there, I transitioned to the newly established Department of Anthropology at the University of Hyderabad, where I joined as a Reader. In due course, I was promoted to Professor and had the privilege of mentoring several doctoral students, particularly in the field of Ecological Anthropology. Prior to my superannuation in 2019, I also had the honour of serving as the Vice-Chancellor of Utkal University of Culture in Bhubaneswar.

My tenure as Director of the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (National Museum of Mankind) in Bhopal and as Director of the Anthropological Survey of India in Kolkata afforded me invaluable opportunities to apply my anthropological training within the domains of museology and cultural studies. My engagement with global anthropological discourse was significantly enriched by the receipt of two prestigious international fellowships—the Commonwealth and the Fulbright. Nevertheless, I continue to regard myself as a lifelong learner in the discipline, still in the early stages of fully grasping its breadth and depth. Anthropology has profoundly shaped my intellectual journey, and I remain deeply indebted to the field.

**In your opinion, how can indigenous knowledge systems be better integrated into mainstream development and policy making?**

During my postdoctoral research at the University of Kent, I was particularly influenced by the work of anthropologists such as Roy Ellen, Laura Rival, and others who have made significant contributions to the study of Indigenous Knowledge (IK) from an anthropological perspective. A central concern in this domain has been addressing the epistemological divide between "Western science" and Indigenous Knowledge systems. I have consistently argued that sustainable development in the Global South cannot be achieved solely through laboratory-based scientific approaches unless these are meaningfully integrated with the rich, context-specific knowledge embedded within Indigenous traditions.

Rather than viewing these epistemologies in hierarchical or comparative terms, I advocate for a framework that recognizes them as complementary—each offering distinct insights that can inform holistic and culturally sensitive approaches to development. Indigenous and tribal communities possess extensive bodies of local knowledge, much of which remains uncodified yet continues to thrive in oral traditions, embodied practices, and everyday interactions with the natural world. This knowledge is grounded in generations of experiential engagement with their environments and reflects an intimate understanding of local ecologies that shapes their worldviews.

Before implementing development initiatives or drafting policy frameworks, it is essential to pose a fundamental question: Whose development are we envisioning? And for whom are these policies being designed? If the goal is to foster development for Indigenous communities, then they must be active participants in the planning processes. Indigenous Knowledge plays a critical role in this regard, offering invaluable perspectives for crafting inclusive, effective, and sustainable policies in developing contexts.

One of the critical challenges in contemporary development planning lies in the persistence of a top-down approach, often underpinned by the flawed assumption of societal and cultural homogeneity. Imposing a universal model of development—frequently shaped by dominant paradigms—has proven not only ineffective but also detrimental, as evidenced by the socio-environmental consequences we currently face. Anthropology, through its commitment to the principle of cultural relativism, offers a vital corrective to this trend. To move toward a genuinely people-centric—as opposed to administration-centric—model of development, it is imperative to recognize and harness the rich potential of Indigenous Knowledge systems specific to individual communities. These knowledge systems are contextually grounded, culturally embedded, and essential for crafting development strategies that are both inclusive and sustainable.

**What role do you see anthropology playing in addressing contemporary issues such as climate change, migration, or digital transformations?**

Anthropology is fundamentally grounded in four core principles: it adopts a holistic perspective, employs a comparative framework, upholds the concept of cultural relativism, and relies on primary data gathered through immersive, long-term fieldwork. Moreover, anthropology is both a theoretical and an applied discipline, leveraging its insights to address pressing real-world issues. Among these are complex global challenges such as climate change, migration, and digital transformation—concerns that are increasingly central to contemporary anthropological inquiry.

Climate change, in particular, has emerged as a critical concern with profound implications for all of humanity. However, anthropology reminds us that the impacts of climate change are not experienced uniformly, nor are they interpreted in the same way across different cultural contexts. Anthropological approaches seek to illuminate the social, economic, political, and cultural dimensions of climate change, highlighting how local knowledge systems and cultural practices shape community responses to environmental disruption. Importantly, many Indigenous and local communities possess rich, experiential knowledge—rooted in generations of environmental interaction—that offers valuable insights into sustainable adaptation strategies. Recognizing and integrating this Indigenous Knowledge is essential for developing equitable and culturally informed climate policies. Along with many other colleagues, I have been advocating for inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge as the 18$^{th}$ Goal of UN's SDGs. The study of migration and its multifaceted impacts has been a central concern of anthropological inquiry since the 1930s. However, it was during the 1970s—when anthropological attention increasingly shifted toward the study of ethnicity—that significant contributions were made to understanding the social and cultural lives of migrant communities and the dynamics of multiple ethnic identities. With the acceleration of globalization from the 1990s onward, new dimensions such as migrant nationalism and multiculturalism have gained prominence, further enriching the anthropological discourse on migration. In my own research on labour migration, particularly among tribal women from both rural and urban settings, I have sought to highlight the gendered dimensions of migratory processes. This work reveals the unique vulnerabilities and challenges faced by tribal women as they navigate urban ecosystems, which are often alienating and structurally exclusionary. These findings underscore the importance of integrating intersectional perspectives—particularly those related to gender, class, and ethnicity—into the study of migration, in order to inform more inclusive and context-sensitive policy frameworks.

Anthropology is undergoing a significant transformation in response to the demands and opportunities of the digital age. As cultures become increasingly diverse, expansive, and interconnected—often shaped by digital technologies—anthropological research must evolve accordingly. The emergence of digital ethnography represents a crucial methodological shift, integrating tools such as computers, photography, videography, and online platforms into the practice of fieldwork. These technologies have not only facilitated more accessible and dynamic modes of data collection but have also expanded the boundaries of what constitutes the "field." Digital anthropology is thus well-positioned to engage with the complex realities of contemporary life, including the aspirations and anxieties of younger generations. It opens new avenues for inquiry into virtual communities, digital identities, algorithmic governance, and other emergent phenomena, reaffirming the relevance of anthropological perspectives in an increasingly mediated world. As the discipline continues to adapt, it must also critically reflect on the ethical, epistemological, and methodological implications of researching in digital spaces.

**How do you see the role of mentorship in shaping future scholars, especially in interdisciplinary spaces and what is your message/advice for the young scholars?**

In the contemporary era, knowledge is expanding at an unprecedented pace, transforming both the scope and methodologies of academic research. The days when anthropologists, particularly those of my generation, focused predominantly on small-scale social spaces and relatively bounded problems are now part of the discipline's history. Today, the research landscape of anthropology has broadened considerably, demanding an interdisciplinary orientation that integrates insights and methods from a range of other fields.

For the current generation of mentors and scholars, it is imperative to embrace methodological pluralism and to engage constructively with approaches beyond the traditional boundaries of anthropology. This requires stepping outside disciplinary comfort zones and fostering a spirit of intellectual openness. Crucially, the persistent notion of disciplinary hierarchies must be critically examined and dismantled. Only through such epistemological humility and collaboration can anthropology remain vibrant, relevant, and responsive to the complex challenges of the modern world.

# Assessing the city of Guwahati from an age-friendly perspective

*By Shashanka Barman*

It was my supervisor, Professor Mini Bhattacharyya Thakur, who walked me through the problems that we face in our everyday lives in the city of Guwahati which we let go due to our busyness and attitude of adjusting; yet, they demand a thorough understanding. I started my problem-oriented research under Gauhati University since 2023. I wanted to study Guwahati with the simple premise: to assess how age-friendly this rapidly urbanizing city is- for the child navigating through busy roads with flyover construction to get to school, for the adolescent, accepting public transport as it is negotiating safety, and for the elderly whose very visits to health centres and accessing essential services remains a challenge.

The first pattern that emerged in my fieldwork was architectural. From offices to health centres, steps outnumbered ramps, and without regard to ergonomics in many places. I began mapping infrastructure that supported or hindered age-friendly access: roads without zebra crossings, service places without seating areas, footpaths with missing tiles and market areas with no public toilets. Children and elderly residents usually have to adjust to navigate physical environments that seems built exclusively for the able-bodied adult.

Transport is an indispensable necessity, but is it really maintained well? In Guwahati, while shared autos and buses offer affordable mobility, they often lack basic considerations for users with reduced mobility. During one of my interviews in Maligaon, a 65-year-old woman recalled falling while trying to board with her daughter into a city bus. Some people mentioned how bus conductors often refused to stop near designated points for children and older or specially-abled passengers, while rash driving is a significant issue people are wary of.

Children too are often dependent on adult accompaniment, especially in areas without school transport. In informal settlements like those near Sarania hills, I observed parents creating 'safe routes' for children by coordinating pick-ups in groups. In anthropological terms, these community adaptations could be seen as bottom-up strategies for urban survival, which scholars like Michel de Certeau have emphasized- how people subvert rigid city structures through everyday practice. A critical part of my study involved visiting health centres and speaking to older adults about their healthcare experiences. The biggest barrier was not that medicine - but access. A clinic near Chandmari had a ramp but no handrails. Another in Beltola was located up two flights of stairs with not a single bench available.

Children immunization centres, on the other hand, were relatively better staffed but lacked sufficient seating for them or accompanying caregivers- a small but telling detail for whom the space was designed for. Anthropologically, this reflects a form of spatial marginality- an exclusion not by law, but by design.

The methods of inquiry unfolded more like a walking conversation with the city than a rigid research plan. I began with non-participant observations- sitting quietly in health centres, transport hubs, residential blocks and marketplaces, watching how people moved, waited, helped, or hesitated. From there, I followed with semi-structured interviews with schoolchildren and shopkeepers, workers and retired teachers, young mothers and civic officials. Their stories came slowly, often in fragments- on the steps of government clinics, outside ward offices, at bus terminals. I also used surveys to capture patterns across neighbourhoods and traced service usage through visitor registers in community facilities.

I conducted interviews in both older housing colonies and newer apartment complexes. In older neighbourhoods like Uzan Bazaar and Ulubari, some elderly residents lived alone in crumbling houses without caregivers, with grown children now settled abroad or elsewhere. Their biggest concern? Loneliness. In contrast, children in low-income housing quarters often shared small spaces with extended family, often craving space for themselves while acquiring optimal bonding. Newer apartment buildings, were inconsistently isolating. One resident in a gated society remarked that her children rarely interacted with neighbours. "There's no community feeling. It's safe, but silent." Some comparatively affluent complexes did provide intergenerational spaces and places to play and relax, while some were merely functioning solely for housing.

What stood out during fieldwork was what was missing- genuinely intergenerational spaces. Most places- schools, offices, senior clubs functioned in a bubble. Even parks, expected to foster casual mixing were divided by age-

A lone elderly resident in an old house without a caregiver

specific zones. In Boripara, a community library attempted a shared reading hour, but few came. The librarian noted, "Kids are busy with studies, and elders feel shy." This highlights that without thoughtful social programming, age-inclusive design risks becoming symbolic rather than meaningful.

Safety emerged as a central theme for children and women. The issue wasn't just about physical danger but about feeling watched, judged, or unwelcome. One 14-year-old told me, "I don't go alone to the main road, even for ice cream. I wait till my brother comes." Similarly, an elderly widow described how men loitering in her neighbourhood made her avoid evening walks. Lighting, visibility, police presence and distance to the main road- all played a role. But so did the social construction of fear, where space itself becomes gendered and aged through repeated narratives of vulnerability. The fieldwork reveals a city in transition, between planning on paper and living in practice. Children, youth, and older adults all navigate the city- but not equally. An age-friendly city, as I have learned, is not a checklist- it is a culture. It is the involvement of people of all age cohorts in the decision making processes, especially the elderly since India has one of the largest urban populations in the world. To add to this, India has 104 million older people (60+years), constituting 8.6% of total population (Census 2011) which by 2050 will increase up to 20% of the population[1].

Ultimately, age-friendliness must be more than a policy- it must be an ethic, embedded in how we imagine and build our cities. Guwahati, with its layered histories and vibrant communities, has the potential to be such a city.

**References**


- The United Nations Population Fund( https://india.unfpa.org/en/topics/population-dynamics-and-research. Accessed on 31st Aug. 2024).



Buses lack adjustable steps for specially-abled people, while another concern is that, here, the footpath is constructed at the same level as that of the main road, hence during busy hours, vehicles pass over the footpaths which causes inconvenience for pedestrians.

Programs involving learning or recreation, such as this musical program held at a park in the Adabari area of Guwahati, pave the way for intergenerational interaction

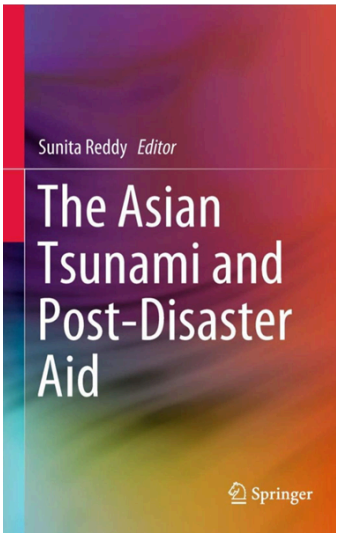
## BOOK REVIEW

# The Asian Tsunami and Post-Disaster Aid

*Book reviewed by R. Harini*

"The tsunami was a wake-up call for humanity to do more, to better understand disaster risks." — Kamal Kishore, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction.

**'The Asian Tsunami and Post-Disaster Aid'**, edited by Dr. Sunita Reddy is a topical volume, co-authored by several environmentalists, social scientists and human rights activists, to problematize overlooked attributes within disaster discourse and management by contextualizing aid interventions in the 2004 Asian Tsunami through the lens of relief, recovery, reconstruction and rehabilitation. The book seeks to situate South Asia's approach to disaster management by addressing crucial concerns within relief strategies including issues of distribution, accountability, transparency, dependency and appropriateness of action initiatives. Most importantly, the book seeks to humanize aid discourse by holistically addressing the lives of afflicted communities; ranging from shelter and livelihood, the role of religious institutions and defense establishments as well as the emergence of ethno-cultural post-disaster conflicts.




The book's content is organized into three distinct parts, each focusing on a critical dimension of tsunami-related efforts. Part I, entitled ***'Aid, Conflict and Differential Distribution'*** explores the intricacies of humanitarian assistance in culturally diverse and politically complex contexts by dissecting the consequences of ethno-political conditions, the politics of state responsibility and rehabilitation and recovery processes among marginalized communities. This section also explores the development of community infrastructure in post-disaster settings,the reconstruction of waterscapes and patterns of resource utilization.

Part II, ***'Build Back Better? Relief Materials, Livelihoods, Shelters and Discontentment***' particularly examines rehabilitation interventions during intra-disaster and post-disaster scenarios, particularly in the Anadaman and Nicobar islands by centering them as as a distinctive socio-ecological spaces. The section describes the impact of state interventions in what is deemed as a '*complex disaster'*, political reorganization and social change among the Nicobarese, the aftermath of the tsunami on habitation and livelihood as well as grievance resolution mechanisms in Sri Lanka that perform as an example for other institutions.

Part III, '***Coping Strategies, Systems and Aid Effectiveness***' expands upon how affected communities sought to mitigate the aftermath of the disaster and the ways in which they operationalized faith, community and memory to make sense of loss and change. It also included a methodological analysis of the **TRIAMS** (*Tsunami Recovery Impact Assessment and Monitoring System*) that advocated for systemic evidence-based monitoring of tsunami recovery efforts. The volume concludes with an examination of tsunami aid and its effectiveness, situating the spatial and sector distribution of aid and reorganizing the linkages between relief, rehabilitation and development.

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## PAST EVENT

For our Distinguished Guest lecture series, an online lecture was organised on **"Weaving Indigenous Knowledge into the SDG Narrative: Whispers from the Field"** delivered by **Prof. Kamal Kant Misra** on April 24th 2025, 6:30pm onwards.

For details about the lecture please visit- **Click here**


YouTube live Link - **Click here**

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