ANTHRO BULLETIN

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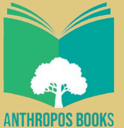
ANTHROPOS INDIA FOUNDATION



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, ***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 have the '*Young Scholars - Notes from the Field*' column featuring 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. We are also excited to introduce a new column, '*Through the Lens*', featuring photo essays on human experiences. **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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Celestial Dancer (Apsara), 11th century CE, Chandela, Madhya Pradesh — sandstone, 88.3 × 50.8 × 31.8 cm (Archaeological Survey of India, Delhi) — this intricately carved dancing apsara, returned from the USA, symbolises lost and regained heritage, embodying traditional beauty in her graceful pose.

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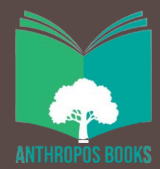

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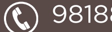 9818858383
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MUSEUMS ARE INDIA'S PRIDE: Time to Revive and Reimagine Them

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

"Museums are places where time is transformed into space. As you walk in a museum, you feel an artificial new sense of time and your body discovers as you move around the objects. It's not the wealth or gold or particular beautiful qualities of the object, but it is the total whole that makes it interesting. And in that sense, museums are very much like novels, we get lost in them, we come across little details, but the composition and the whole sense of the thing is the most important part."
- Orhan Pamuk, Nobel Prize-winning Author

As the world recently observed International Museum Day, it is an opportune moment to reflect on the significance of museums in preserving civilizational memory and shaping cultural consciousness. For many of us, museum visits began during childhood school excursions moments filled more with excitement, laughter, and curiosity than deep understanding. We wandered through galleries, admired ancient sculptures, marveled at fossils and artifacts, and posed for photographs, often without fully grasping their historical importance.

It is only later in life that we begin to appreciate museums as guardians of tangible heritage spaces where history is preserved, interpreted, and passed on to future generations. Over time, one realizes that India possesses an extraordinary cultural wealth unmatched anywhere in the world. Whether it is textiles, pottery, Janjati traditions, sculptures, paintings, crafts, manuscripts, or prehistoric cave art, India's heritage is astonishing in both scale and diversity.

India today has one of the largest museum networks in the world. Though exact figures vary, the country is estimated to have nearly 1,000-1,100 museums across central, state, private, university, tribal, and thematic sectors. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) alone manages more than 50 site museums, while the National Council of Science Museums operates one of the world's largest science museum networks with over 26 science centres. The Ministry of Culture oversees iconic institutions such as the National Museum, Indian Museum, Salar Jung Museum, Victoria Memorial Hall, and many others.

Some museums I have personally visited left a profound impression on me through their remarkable collections and thoughtful curation. The Salar Jung Museum in Hyderabad, the National Crafts Museum in Delhi, the SCSTRTI Museum in Bhubaneswar, the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS) in Bhopal, the Bihar Museum in Patna, and the Buddha Relic Museum at Piprahwa are among the finest examples of India's living heritage displayed with depth and dignity.

Having also visited some of Europe's most celebrated museums many of which prominently display artifacts acquired during colonial rule, I was struck by the sophistication of their presentation and storytelling. Entry fees are often high, yet visitors willingly spend hours engaging with exhibits because museums there are designed as immersive experiences. In contrast, India possesses equally rich, if not richer, collections, but many remain underrepresented, poorly interpreted, or inadequately showcased.

There is an urgent need to transform our museums from static repositories into vibrant cultural experiences. Merely displaying an artifact with its name and date of discovery is not enough. Objects become meaningful only when their stories are narrated, who created them, how they were used, what social worlds they belonged to, and why they matter today. Museums must move beyond preservation alone and embrace interpretation, aesthetics, and public engagement.

Encouragingly, India is witnessing renewed interest in museum revitalization. Across the country, new museums are being planned while older institutions are undergoing modernization. Technologies such as augmented reality, virtual reality, immersive galleries, and digital storytelling are increasingly being integrated into exhibitions to make museums more interactive and accessible, especially for younger generations.

One of the most ambitious initiatives underway is the Yuge Yugeen Bharat Museum envisioned as a grand civilizational museum being developed within the historic North and South Block buildings in New Delhi. Several museums dedicated to Janjatiya (tribal) freedom fighters and indigenous cultures are also being established across India. Significantly, the Union Budget for 2025-26 earmarked ₹3,360.96 crore for the Ministry of Culture, including ₹716.93 crore specifically for museums a promising indicator of institutional commitment toward cultural preservation.

From an anthropological perspective, museums are far more than spaces for displaying artifacts; they are

dynamic cultural institutions that connect communities across time and geography. Anthropologists view museums as sites where identities, memories, and histories are continuously negotiated and reinterpreted. In a world increasingly marked by social divisions, migration, globalization, and cultural conflict, museums can serve as powerful spaces for dialogue, empathy, and understanding.

By presenting multiple perspectives through exhibitions, oral histories, and community participation, museums help people appreciate cultural diversity while also recognizing shared human experiences. This role becomes particularly significant in postcolonial and multicultural societies, where museums can challenge stereotypes, recover marginalized histories, and amplify indigenous and local voices.

At the same time, anthropology reminds us that museums are not entirely neutral institutions. Historically, many museums emerged within unequal power structures, especially during colonial periods when artifacts were often acquired through coercion or exploitation. Today, museums across the world are rethinking traditional practices of collection and display. Collaborative curation, repatriation of cultural artifacts, and community-led exhibitions are increasingly reshaping museums into more inclusive and participatory spaces.

By involving indigenous groups, local communities, and minority cultures in decision-making processes, museums foster cultural respect and social cohesion. In this evolving role, museums become agents of reconciliation and bridges between civilizations helping humanity move toward a more interconnected and culturally sensitive future.

For anthropology students and scholars, museums also offer exciting professional opportunities. Museum anthropology, curation, heritage management, exhibition design, and visual culture studies are emerging as important career pathways. Those with an interest in art, aesthetics, culture, and history can find museums deeply rewarding spaces to work in intellectually stimulating and socially meaningful at the same time. Anthropos India Foundation has also published Two Dozen Careers in Anthropology, which explores such emerging professional avenues in detail. One can purchase the book here - https://abpublications.anthroposindiafoundation.com/product/two-dozen-careers-in-anthropology/

This issue of Anthro Bulletin, once again, brings together insightful and engaging articles for its readers. We look forward to receiving many more thoughtful contributions from scholars, students, and enthusiasts alike.

Happy reading!

The Nature of Anthropology: Science, Humanities, or Both?

Prof. Kamal K. Misra, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology, KISS-DU, Bhubaneswar

In the intellectual landscape of anthropology, there are occasionally heated discussions and disagreements on the nature of the discipline, including whether it is science, the humanities, or something that defies such strict classification. This discussion began long back when it became a recognized academic field in the nineteenth century and is still going strong now. The main reason for the controversy is that anthropology examines the biological, social, cultural, historical, and symbolic aspects of humanity. As a result, it makes use of techniques and viewpoints from the humanities as well as the natural and social sciences. Therefore, the field is situated at the confluence of interpretive knowledge and field-based empirical research.

At this point, it is crucial to briefly revisit the history of anthropology. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, anthropology's scientific focus became particularly evident. Pioneering anthropologists like Lewis Henry Morgan and Edward Burnett Tylor in their publications, Ancient Society (1877) and Primitive Society (1871), respectively, aimed at formulating universal principles that governed human society and culture. Influenced by the positivist mindset of their era, they, along with other evolutionists, believed that human societies progressed through distinct stages from "primitive" to "civilized." Many anthropologists of this generation endeavoured to replicate the methodologies of the natural sciences by employing classification, comparison, and the pursuit of general laws of social evolution.

The scientific character of Anthropology became increasingly consolidated with the emergence of Physical or Biological Anthropology. This branch investigates human evolution, genetics, adaptation, and primatology through rigorous scientific methods such as observation, measurement, laboratory analysis, and statistical techniques, firmly situating Anthropology within the biological sciences. Likewise, Archaeology employs scientific approaches, including excavation techniques, material analysis, and ecological reconstruction, to interpret past human societies. Collectively, these branches demonstrate that Anthropology possesses a strong empirical and scientific foundation.

In Social and Cultural Anthropology, too, numerous scholars emphasized the importance of systematic fieldwork and objective inquiry. Bronislaw Malinowski's book, Argonauts of the Western Pacific (1922) set a new trend in anthropological research through the method of participant observation, insisting that anthropologists must collect first-hand empirical evidence from everyday life. Over time, Anthropology evolved rigorous methodological traditions involving field surveys, interviews, kinship analysis, and comparative investigation. Structural - functional anthropologists such as A. R. Radcliffe-Brown's Structure and Function in Primitive Society (1952) further argued that societies could be studied scientifically as integrated systems governed by identifiable structures and social functions.

However, Anthropology cannot be confined solely within the framework of science. Admittedly, human life is shaped not only by measurable facts but also by meanings, symbols, beliefs, emotions, memories, and values. These dimensions require interpretation rather than mere quantification. Consequently, many anthropologists have argued that Anthropology is equally a humanistic discipline concerned with understanding lived experience and cultural meaning.

The humanistic orientation became more influential in the mid-twentieth century, particularly through interpretive and symbolic anthropology. In The Interpretations of Cultures (1973), Clifford Geertz famously described culture as "webs of significance" spun by human beings themselves. According to Geertz, the task of Anthropology is not to discover universal laws but to interpret meanings embedded in social practices and symbols. Anthropological inquiry therefore resembles textual interpretation more than laboratory experimentation. The anthropologist seeks "thick description," that is, a deep understanding of the cultural context within which human actions acquire meaning.

Anthropology also shares important affinities with the humanities through its concern with history, language, ethics, aesthetics, and narrative. Ethnographies are often literary in style and rely heavily on descriptive and interpretive writing. Anthropologists frequently engage with philosophical questions regarding identity, morality, power, gender, memory, and representation. In this sense, Anthropology overlaps with disciplines such as History, Philosophy, Literature, and Cultural Studies.

The debate between Anthropology as science and Anthropology as humanities became especially intense during the postmodern turn during 1970s and 1980s. Postmodern anthropologists challenged the

possibility of complete objectivity in ethnographic research. They argued that anthropological knowledge is shaped by the researcher's own cultural background, language, and power relations. Scholars such as James Clifford emphasized that ethnographies are not neutral scientific reports but constructed narratives influenced by interpretation and representation. This critique weakened the earlier positivist claim that Anthropology could function exactly like the natural sciences.

At the same time, many anthropologists resisted reducing the discipline entirely to literary interpretation. They maintained that Anthropology's strength lies precisely in its ability to combine empirical research with interpretive analysis. Anthropological fieldwork involves systematic data collection, long-term observation, and comparative methodology, which are scientific in orientation. Yet the interpretation of cultural meanings requires sensitivity, reflexivity, and humanistic understanding. Thus, Anthropology cannot be adequately understood through a rigid dichotomy between science and humanities.

Contemporary Anthropology increasingly embraces its interdisciplinary character. Today, anthropologists study diverse issues such as globalization, migration, climate change, digital cultures, public health, indigenous knowledge, and identity politics. These complex subjects demand both scientific analysis and humanistic interpretation. Medical Anthropology, for example, combines biological knowledge with cultural understandings of illness and healing. Environmental Anthropology integrates ecological science with indigenous cosmologies and local knowledge systems. Linguistic Anthropology examines language both structurally and symbolically. Such developments illustrate that Anthropology derives its vitality from methodological pluralism.

The debate over whether Anthropology is a science or a humanity reflects the discipline's unique intellectual spread. Anthropology is scientific in its use of empirical methods, systematic observation, and comparative analysis, yet deeply humanistic in its interpretation of meanings, experiences, and cultural worlds. Rather than fitting exclusively into either category, Anthropology serves as a bridge discipline integrating scientific inquiry with humanistic understanding. Its holistic concern with humanity in all its biological, social, cultural, and symbolic dimensions makes it one of the most dynamic disciplines in contemporary academia.

Thus, Anthropology resists rigid disciplinary boundaries. Its strength lies in combining scientific methodology with interpretive insight. As Gopala Sarana observes in The Methodology of Anthropological Comparisons (1975), Anthropology is "a science of a different kind" because it studies conscious human beings embedded in cultural and symbolic worlds.

ARTICLE 1

Museums as Cultural Bridges: Connecting Communities in a Divided World

A Report on the International Museum Day Online Guest Lecture, 18 May 2026
Organised by Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS), Bhopal, in collaboration with Anthropos India Foundation (AIF), under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture, Government of India

Saba Farhin

Sukanya Guha Niyogi

On the afternoon of 18 May 2026, International Museum Day, over 107 participants from across India and beyond convened online via Google Meet and YouTube Live (47 on the call, 60 on the stream) for a guest lecture on one of the most pressing questions facing cultural institutions today. The audience reflected the breadth of the conversation: PhD scholars and undergraduate students, museum curators and faculty members, independent researchers and journalists, community museum founders and government officials, drawn from institutions spanning Dibrugarh to Dharwad, Kohima to Kozhikode, Patna to Pondicherry. The question that united them was as urgent as it was unresolved: in a world being rapidly reshaped by artificial intelligence, what would it mean to build a museum around it and whose knowledge, memory, and values would such a museum hold?

The event had been organised by the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS), Bhopal, in collaboration with the Anthropos India Foundation (AIF), under this year's ICOM theme - Museums Unite the Divided World. Prof. Amitabh Pande, Director of IGRMS, delivered the welcome address, situating the occasion within the museum's longstanding commitment to living cultures and multidisciplinary learning. Prof. Dr Amareswar Galla, of the International Institute for the Inclusive Museum, Australia and US, chaired the session. Prof. Sunita Reddy, Founder-Chairperson of AIF, moderated. The lecture itself - titled Modelling a Museum of AI Cultures (MAIC) - was delivered by Dr Alison Kahn, Associate in Research and Innovation in AI and Design Anthropology at the School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Loughborough University.

Setting the Scene

Prof. Pande opened by framing the museum as what he called "a lab of learning for the social sciences" - not a repository of the past, but a futuristic institution capable of bringing people together across difference. In a world order marked by competition and conflict, he argued, museums carry a unique responsibility to sensitise visitors to the lessons of history and the value of cultural diversity. He welcomed the lecture as an opportunity for his own institution to expand its horizons, acknowledging that IGRMS - as a museum of living cultures - was already grappling with precisely the tensions that AI would now sharpen.

Prof. Galla, chairing the session from Antwerp, brought decades of experience as former Vice President of ICOM to the occasion. He noted that the selection of each year's ICOM theme emerges from genuine debate about contemporary relevance, and that AI is, in his words, "as relevant as anything else - if not more - in safeguarding our heritage values." He flagged three concerns he would return to at the close: the question of who controls whose narrative; the importance of the UNESCO Code of Ethics for AI; and the fundamental problem of biased training datasets, where entire communities are represented almost exclusively through the writings of outsiders.

A Fog of Uncertainty

Dr. Kahn opened not with data but with a painting. J.M.W. Turner's Rain, Steam, and Speed (1844) was painted at the moment railways were being carved through the English countryside - villages excavated, landscapes pulled apart, lives overturned by a technology that most people did not yet understand. In Turner's haze, a steam train bears down on a hare that is, for a brief moment, still just ahead. Dr. Kahn called it "painting the fog of uncertainty" - a meditation on a seismic technological transition whose full consequences no one could foresee. She used it as a mirror for the present: we are, she said, at another such inflection point, except that the scale of what AI will change is incomparably larger than anything the industrial revolution brought.

Her AHRC-funded project at Loughborough University - undertaken in partnership with the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, and the Francis Crick Institute, London - has been mapping that change in real time. Over the past year, she and her team have documented more than 90 AI-related exhibitions across six continents, assembling a global dataset that allows her to ask the question she believes the museum world has not yet properly faced: not what should museums do with AI, but what does AI do to the very idea of the museum when viewed from multiple cultural positions simultaneously?

Six Ways of Knowing AI

The answer, it turns out, depends entirely on where you are standing. Drawing on philosopher Karen Knorr Cetina's concept of epistemic cultures - the insight that different communities do not merely reach different conclusions, but produce knowledge through fundamentally different logics - Dr. Kahn laid out six distinct types of museum-AI relationship she had identified in her dataset.

At one end sits the demonstrative: AI as spectacle, celebrated for what it can do, dominant in North American and East Asian flagship institutions. Beside it, the technocratic pedagogical, where AI is deployed as educational infrastructure - genuinely useful, but treating the technology as a solved problem to be explained rather than contested. Then the critical infrastructural, found at institutions such as the V&A and museums across Germany and the Netherlands, where algorithmic systems are made visible and subjected to public scrutiny. Further along, the postcolonial restitutive, emerging in Latin American and African institutions, where AI is used to surface histories that dominant archives have chosen not to see. Then the ontological and protective: exhibitions that foreground not what AI can do, but what it should not touch - knowledge systems constitutively resistant to the database record. And finally, the ecological speculative: AI as a medium for new aesthetic and environmental thinking, found in artist residency programmes and experimental commissions.

What was striking, Dr. Kahn emphasised, was not the existence of these six positions but their uneven geography. The institutions with the largest AI budgets cluster around the first two types. Those with the most urgent reasons to resist the universalising claims of Western AI systems cluster around the last two. That distribution, she observed, tracks a colonial history and institutional resource inequality with considerable precision.

The Problem of the Single Story

Invoking Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's warning about the danger of the single story, Dr. Kahn turned to evidence from a panel she had co-chaired at the Association of Art History conference at Cambridge University in April 2026. Four scholars, four cultures, four incommensurable starting points.

A Korean curator working with the Korean Cultural Centre in the UK demonstrated how AI, when not disciplined by deep institutional knowledge, defaults to Eurocentric frameworks - the critical variable being not the sophistication of the algorithm, but the depth of the human knowledge shaping it. A team from King's College London argued that AI-driven art does not simply enter the museum; it restructures the institution itself, distributing authorship across human artists, algorithms, and datasets in ways that existing legal, preservation, and curatorial frameworks cannot accommodate. The Metaacervo project at the University of São Paulo used AI to connect marginalised imagery across 17 Brazilian collections - and treated the algorithm's failures with non-Western and non-figurative imagery not as defects to be corrected, but as curatorial content in themselves.

Most philosophically demanding was the work of scholar Chandni Jaswani, who argued that certain cultural objects — particularly those embedded in sacred or ritual temporalities - carry meanings that are not merely complex but ontologically incompatible with computational frameworks. A ritual object used in ceremony on the Ghats of Varanasi carries significance that is relational, embodied, communal, and temporal. Its meaning changes depending on who handles it, in which ritual context, at which point in the ceremonial calendar. A museum catalogue can record its material composition and provenance. What it cannot record is what the object means as a living presence. When AI is trained on such catalogues at scale, it does not merely reproduce colonial extraction - it automates and accelerates it.

The Myth of Collective Memory

Dr. Kahn illustrated the ethical stakes through the work of digital artist Refik Anadol, whose immersive AI installations have drawn on hundreds of millions of publicly available images - from MoMA's collection, the LA Philharmonic's century-old archives, NASA telescope photographs, and Gaudí's architectural sketches. Anadol describes his work as an act of service to collective memory, a way of making the invisible visible. The installations are visually extraordinary; Dr. Kahn acknowledged their power.

But she pressed on the phrase "heritage of humanity" that Anadol uses to describe his source material. In the UNESCO context, that phrase carries specific institutional obligations - custodians of world heritage are accountable to the communities whose heritage they hold in trust. In Anadol's framing, it describes data aggregated without systematic consent and transformed into commercial art work under individual authorship. The mere act of assembling large quantities of cultural data, Dr. Kahn argued, does not constitute collective memory. What AI produces in such cases is a representation of external traces, processed by a system that has no access to the meaning those traces carry.

Resonances from India

The discussion that followed was as illuminating as the lecture itself. Prof. Galla raised the issue of biased training data - in his own community, he noted, 99.9% of the written record had been produced by outsiders, many of them casting the community as primitive or exotic. AI search simply amplifies those distortions. Prof. Pande reflected that IGRMS faces precisely this tension: the knowledge the institution holds belongs to communities, not to curators, and resists reduction to algorithmic categories. From the audience, Dr Rajni Lamba probed the concept of the myth of collective memory, while Prof. Shalina Mehta asked the question many in the room were sitting with: what happens to reality - to the Bhopal gas tragedy, to the sacred, to the historically specific - when an algorithm generates an alternative image of it, and future generations encounter that image as truth?

Dr. Kahn's response was measured but clear. Follow the money, she said: towards the end of last year, the balance in AI exhibitions had shifted sharply toward commercial importance and away from ethics. Her recommendation for institutions such as IGRMS was both practical and

principled - build closed, internal AI systems anchored in your own datasets, rather than ceding your collections to external platforms. Analogue must always coexist with digital. When the plug is pulled, where will future generations go for truth?

A Question That Remains Open

As the session drew to a close — the audience of researchers, students, curators, teachers, journalists, and museum professionals logging off from Banaras Hindu University, Victoria Memorial Hall Kolkata, the Ho Museum in Jharkhand, the Koitalel Samoei Museum, KIRTADS Kerala, the Northeast India Audio-Visual Archive, and dozens of other institutions across the country — the question Dr Kahn had posed at the outset remained, deliberately, unresolved.

The task for a Museum of AI Cultures, she concluded, is not to declare a winner between the optimism of demonstrative AI and the philosophical resistance of the ontological position. Both are correct within their own epistemic frameworks. The institutional challenge is to build structures adequate to holding both simultaneously — so that neither commercial enthusiasm nor cultural erasure becomes the default. In a world where AI is being shaped by those who can afford to invest in it, that may be among the most important contributions museums can make.

ARTICLE 2

Sijimali: A Struggle for Forest, Faith, and Future

By Monalisha Sahu

The Sijimali hills are historically significant because they form part of the broader tribal uplands of Odisha, where communities have lived for centuries. The region is abundant in forests that supports livelihood and perennial streams, that support the agriculture and meet the water need of the nearby villages. The herbs and medicinal plants are used by Dalits and Adivasis for healing purposes, as they are carrier of indigenous knowledge associated with their surroundings. Locally termed as Tijmali, the abode of Tij Raja, but in government record it is Sijimali. These hill regions were historically governed through customary practices rather than formal state systems.

Protectors of Sacred Hill

Local folklore describes Tij Raja as a trusted friend and protector of the people, while Khandual Raja is viewed as an aged and wise elder who guides the community. Niyam Raja is believed to uphold the practices and sacred order of the land. In Niyamgiri, people worship Niyam Raja and also honour Tij Raja, while in Sijimali communities revere Tij Raja together with Niyam Raja. These shared beliefs reveal a strong cultural and spiritual relationship between the people of both hill regions. The bond is strengthened by their physical closeness, as a forest walk of nearly two hours connects Sijimali to Niyamgiri. For this reason, residents of neighbouring villages have joined together to support the ongoing resistance in Sijimali.

Biodiversity and Sacred Landscape

The villages in Sijimali, are largely inhabited by Scheduled Tribe communities, particularly the Kandha and Paraja, along with Dom Dalit populations. Dr. Randall Sequeira, who has been engaged in the region for the last six years studying traditional healing practices, has closely observed how local communities interact with the surrounding environment and biodiversity. The plateau on top of Sijimali provides a suitable habitat for several distinctive plant species that are used by traditional healers in their medicinal practices. The area is also an important grazing ground for the cattle of the Kandha community. Sijimali contains sacred groves that are spiritually significant to the tribal communities and are believed to be the dwelling places of their gods and goddesses. While Dharani Penu, the Earth Goddess, is considered the supreme deity, each village also worships around 15 to 20 local deities located across the hill, especially before sowing and harvest seasons. These sacred symbols may be represented by ancient trees, customary boundary stones, or rocks. Dr. Sequeira further notes that the Adivasis believe that, any damage caused to these sacred places would provoke the displeasure of the gods.

Conflict between Customary Practices and State Law

In 2023, the Odisha government allotted the Sijimali bauxite mine covering approximately 1,549 hectares across the districts of Kalahandi and Rayagada, to Vedanta. Situated in the core of Odisha's bauxite-rich region, the project area includes eight villages in Thuamul Rampur tehsil of Kalahandi and ten villages in Kashipur tehsil of Rayagada. Nearly 45 percent of the mining lease area is under forest cover, consisting of both reserved forests and village forest lands. Since July 2023, villagers living within and around the proposed mining lease area have strongly resisted the bauxite project, coming together to block entry into their villages and to the Sijimali hilltop. Residents from the affected villages have collectively demanded that the mining

Sijimali is beautifully surrounded by mother nature. (Source: https://www.sanctuarynaturefoundation.org/articles)

lease granted to Vedanta Limited be withdrawn. They expressed fears that if environmental clearance is granted, it would destroy their way of life, disrupt their social and cultural systems and weaken their deeply rooted belief traditions. Adivasi and Dalit communities would face permanent displacement from their ancestral lands, forests, and streams that have sustained them for generations. As a Fifth Schedule area, Sijimali is constitutionally meant to protect tribal land, culture, and self-governance. However, the mining project has created several conflicts. Villagers have questioned whether Gram Sabha consent under the PESA Act was genuine and free from pressure. Communities also argue that their forest and community rights under the Forest Rights Act were not fully recognized before project clearances. Another major conflict is between tribal customary practices, which treats hills and forests as ancestral and sacred spaces, and state law, which views the same land as a resource for mining. Fears of displacement, ecological damage, and loss of livelihood have further intensified resistance. Overall, the Sijimali case reflects the tension between constitutional safeguards for tribal communities and state-led development.

Conclusion

The Sijimali issue illustrates the struggle between mining-based development and the rights of local tribal communities. For the people living there, the hills are not just land, but their home, source of livelihood and part of their culture and belief system. It also shows that laws made to protect tribal people are often not properly followed in practice. A fair solution should be to listen to the voices of local communities, protect nature, as well as livelihoods. The future of Sijimali should be decided with justice, respect, and the consent of the people who have lived there for generations.

A meeting is going on in Sijimali region. (Source: https://thepolisproject.com)

Metabolic Syndrome: Risk and its Prevention

by Subhrajyoti Das

Introduction

Metabolic Syndrome (MetS) has emerged as one of the major critical public health concerns globally, particularly in the Low- and Middle-income countries like India. It represents a bunch of interrelated metabolic abnormalities, including central obesity, hypertension, dyslipidaemia, and hyperglycemia, that together increase the risk of cardiovascular diseases (CVDs) and type 2 diabetes. While MetS is often viewed through a biomedical lens, its prevalence and progression are deeply influenced by social, cultural, and behavioural contexts. Understanding MetS as a bio-social condition is essential for designing meaningful prevention strategies.

UNDERSTANDING THE RISK: WHAT LEADS TO METS?

The risk of developing MetS is shaped by multiple determinants:

- **Lifestyle Changes:** Rapid socio- economic changes, urbanisation, and shifting food practices have changed traditional dietary patterns. High-calorie processed foods, reduced physical activity (PA), and increased sedentary behaviour contribute significantly to the rise of MetS, even in rural and tribal communities.
- **Genetic and Intergenerational Factors:** Certain populations, including many indigenous groups in India, may have a higher genetic predisposition to central obesity or glucose intolerance. Intergenerational changes, such as shifts in occupation, diet, or physical activity, also influence variability in MetS prevalence between younger and older generations.
- **Socio-cultural Practices:** Cultural food preferences, gender norms, substance consumption patterns, and perceptions of body weight affect health behaviour. Among tribal communities, transitions from agricultural activities to wage labour often reduce physical exertion, thereby elevating metabolic risks.
- **Environmental and Economic Pressures:** Limited access to healthcare, dependence on market foods, and economic vulnerability further intensify the burden. Stress, resulting from livelihood insecurity is also increasingly recognised as a contributor to hypertension and insulin resistance.

WHY METS IS A GROWING CONCERN IN INDIA

India is experiencing a double burden of malnutrition, persistent undernutrition coexisting with rising overweight, obesity, and non-communicable diseases (NCDs). MetS is particularly alarming because: It develops silently, often without early symptoms. It affects adults at younger ages. It increases healthcare costs for already vulnerable households. It disproportionately affects marginalised populations, including tribal groups. This makes MetS not only a medical problem but also a socio-economic and anthropological issue.

PREVENTION: A MULTI-LAYERED APPROACH

- **Community-based Awareness and Education:** Raising awareness about the signs, risks, and long-term impact of MetS is essential. Health education campaigns must be culturally sensitive and delivered in local languages, incorporating community leaders, women's groups, and youth clubs.
- **Promoting Traditional Diets and Food Diversity**: Traditional food systems rich in millet, green vegetables, and wild edibles are often nutritionally superior to commercial processed foods. Reviving indigenous crops and encouraging kitchen gardens can help restore balanced diets.
- **Encouraging Physical Activity:** Regular physical activity, such as walking, cycling, agricultural tasks, and community sports, can reduce abdominal fat and improve metabolic health. In tribal settings,

community-based physical activity programs can be effective and culturally appropriate.

- **Routine Screening and Early Detection:** Periodic screening for blood pressure, glucose, and lipid profile is fundamental, especially for individuals with a family history of diabetes or hypertension. Mobile health clinics and field-based health workers can make screening accessible.
- **Behavioural Change Interventions:** Reducing alcohol consumption, quitting tobacco, improving sleep habits, and managing stress are crucial for lowering MetS risk. Behaviour change communication (BCC) strategies tailored to local contexts are highly effective.
- **Policy-level Interventions:** Government initiatives to improve access to healthcare, regulate food marketing, subsidise healthy foods, and strengthen primary health services contribute significantly to MetS prevention. Integrating NCD care into the existing public health framework is essential.

CONCLUSION

Metabolic Syndrome is rapidly emerging as a major health challenge, shaped by both biological factors and socio-cultural transitions. Preventing MetS requires more than medical intervention: it needs community participation, culturally informed health education, policy support, and a return to balanced diets and active lifestyles. Recognising MetS as a bio- social phenomenon allows for a more comprehensive understanding and ensures that prevention strategies are sustainable and effective.

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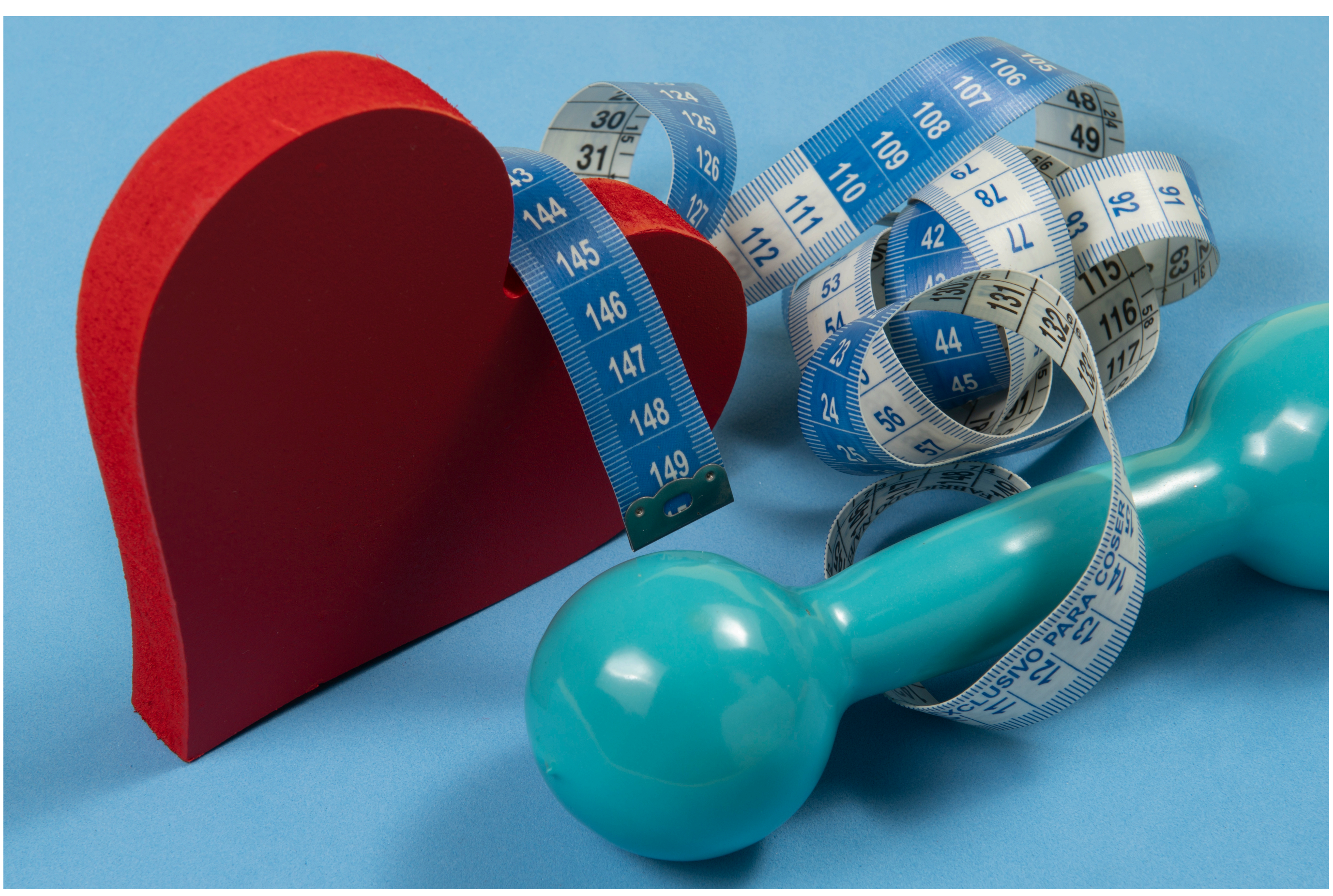
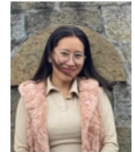


Togetherness forever: Ethnographic reflections on the Mongmong Festival of the Sangtam tribe in Nagaland



By Kekhriekuonuo Chielie

Introduction

A festival is a celebration of ceremonies and ritual customs featuring feast, rituals, dances, songs and cultural practices. It can be associated with tradition or contemporary societies representing functional values. Nagaland, is settled in the hills, is of one of the seven sister state of Northeast India. Nagaland, is therefore, popularly known as the 'land of festivals'. Culturally diverse with over 17 recognized tribes, vigorous traditions and heritage. Each tribe speaks a different language and further differed by dialects from village to village and region to region. Festivals in Nagaland are traditionally celebrated with rituals and often involving sacrificial feast of various animals. Festivals are celebrated in honor of agricultural cycles, victory battles, spiritual beliefs and so on. Every tribe has their own way of celebrating separate ceremonies and practices. Every tribal community in Nagaland celebrates each tribal festival.

The Mongmong festival in Nagaland, celebrated by the Sangtam tribes of the Nagas, is observed and practiced in the month of September. The Sangtam tribes are one of the major tribes in Nagaland hailing from Kiphire and Tuensang District. Out of the various festivals of the Sangtams, the Mongmong festival is the most important of all and widely acclaimed by the tribe. "Mongmong" means 'everlasting unity/togetherness forever' interpreted from the Sangtam language. It is celebrated in the first week of September, annually for six days, each day representing a specific significant event to the festival. It is a pre harvest celebration of harvest to which the 6th day culminates the beginning of harvest of grains with blessings from God. It captures unity and communal bonding defining spiritual gratitude within the tribe.

Significance of the Festival

The digit 6 carries great importance to the Sangtam Nagas and it marks a notable feature in ritual practices and other traditional events. The festival signifies the agricultural cycle and the spiritual devotion of bringing villagers together in prayer, celebration and thanksgiving. The events of the festival are followed as per the series given below:

Day one: Sinkkitsa is observed as the preparation of the festival where the domestic animals and are roped. Transaction of food is also stocked and firewood items are also collected for the next day.

Day two: It involves sacrificing animals where specific animals are chosen for this day. The animals include the domestic animals like cows, pigs, Mithun roped and killed on this day. They are cooked as sacrificial meat. Some meat is kept aside for the feast to the village and some portions are for guest and family groups. The eldest women of the household family perform the rituals in this event and,

Day three: is called Müsüh-yangtüp which is considered the most important day of the festival. This day is marked as the day of offering to three hearth stones. The stones represent household deities. The offering is done to invoke blessing and prosperity. Villages are refrained from working in the fields to protect the village from calamities and evil spirits.

Day four: Kikhalangpi which is known as the \ purification of clearing the path and road of the village in which the menfolk will partake to walk on. This symbolizes renewal and done in order to free from the fever of the Mongmong festival.

Day five: Shilang wuba Nyumong is the fifth day of the festival where the villagers visit one's relative, neighbour and exchange food, meat, gifts and practices the unity of brotherhood strengthening village bonds.

Day six: Akatisingkithsa, the last day of the festival. Harvesting and village activities are then started, concluding that the divine deities has fully blessed them. Nettle leaves are placed on the rooftops to ward of the evil eye and spirits and the village is back to starting a new life now. This 6 day festival of the Sangtams represents brotherhood and mirrors the social rituals of traditional practices. The Mongmong festival stands as a vibrant marker of cultural resilience. Each day holds a specific activity streaks, a new venture with enthusiasm and joyful celebrations. The power of three stones are central and holds a significant figure among the Sangtam Nagas.

Conclusion: Festivals in Nagaland are present in the cultural marker even with embracing Christianity by replacing the animistic beliefs into modern faith. Contemporary practices are contributing to re thinking of the traditional values and expressed through modern community worship. The Mongmong festival thrives and continues preserving ancestral beliefs.

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Dr. Mithun Sikdar

Interview by Saba Farhin

Dr. Mithun Sikdar is a Superintending Anthropologist (Physical) at the Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI), currently serving as Head of Office at its Southern Regional Centre, Mysuru. He obtained his MSc (2004) and PhD (2010) in Anthropology from Dibrugarh University, Assam. His doctoral research examined the recurring flood conditions in Assam and their impact on the physical health of tribal populations, reflecting his long-standing engagement with bio-cultural and environmental determinants of health.

Dr. Sikdar's research spans biological anthropology, human genetics, and epidemiology, with significant early contributions to understanding globin gene distribution and its health implications among populations in Northeast India. His core areas of interest include Pediatric Auxology, Genetic Demography, Forensic Anthropology, and Molecular Anthropology. Over the years, he has led and contributed to several important research projects, including studies on Hemoglobinopathies, Child Growth and Nutrition, DNA polymorphism, type 2 diabetes, and the bio-cultural diversity of Indian populations, Gut Microbiome Research, Geriatric Research particularly under initiatives of AnSI and ICSSR.

He is a recipient of numerous prestigious recognitions, including the Young Scientist Award from the Indian Science Congress Association and International Young Scientist Travel Grant Award (two times) from ICMR, as well as multiple awards from the UIAF. His academic journey is complemented by specialized training in SPSS from Indian Statistical Institute, forensic archaeology from DPAA, USA, Molecular Genetics and Epigenomics from MAHE, Reproductive Genomics from AIIMS and Bioinformatics from Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore.

In addition to his research roles, Dr. Sikdar has held several academic and professional positions, including ICSSR Fellow, UGC-DRS (SAP) Fellow, and Assistant Anthropologist at AnSI. Through his work, he continues to contribute significantly to advancing anthropological research in India.

What inspired your journey into anthropology, and how has your journey been so far?

My father was a civil servant with the National Sample Survey Organisation and an exceptionally dedicated fieldworker. Since my childhood, I had the opportunity to closely observe his extensive field investigations across diverse socio-economic and cultural settings. Those experiences silently shaped my own intellectual curiosity and gradually nurtured within me a deep fascination for understanding the unknown through field-based enquiry. Long before I formally entered the discipline, the spirit of fieldwork had already become an inseparable part of my imagination. Anthropology later emerged as the ideal discipline that gave direction, structure, and meaning to that curiosity.

During my bachelor's studies, there was a mandatory fieldwork component of nearly fifteen days in a nearby village. That was my first formal exposure to anthropological fieldwork. What initially began as an academic exercise soon transformed into a deeply personal experience. I realised that fieldwork was not merely a methodological requirement; rather, it was a way of learning life through people, practices, narratives, and lived realities. The enthusiasm that had developed within me extended far beyond the coursework. Even after the formal fieldwork ended, I continued visiting the same community independently for another two months. Often, I travelled nearly forty kilometres alone on my bicycle simply to reach the village and document the festivals, ritual practices, and seasonal socio-cultural activities organised by the community. Those repeated visits taught me observation, participation, and the importance of building trust with communities.

After completing my Master's degree, I was fortunate to become associated with the DRS (SAP) Project at Dibrugarh University, where I received the opportunity to stay among and work closely with various population groups across Northeast India. Even my PhD work in the flood affected villages of Assam significantly expanded my understanding of human diversity, adaptation, ethnicity, ecology, and culture. Living within communities rather than merely visiting them allowed me to experience anthropology in its most immersive form.

My subsequent induction into the Anthropological Survey of India in different capacities further widened the horizon of my anthropological journey. It provided me with invaluable opportunities to travel across different parts of India and engage with numerous population groups through diverse bio-cultural perspectives. Working in varied geographical and cultural settings enabled me to appreciate the intricate relationship between biology, culture, environment, health, and human adaptation in Indian populations. Each field experience contributed not only to my academic growth, but also to my personal understanding of human resilience, diversity, and continuity. That same enthusiasm continues even today. Whenever circumstances permit, I still seek to engage with people, cultures, and communities through an anthropological lens, carrying forward the spirit of fieldwork that first inspired me in childhood. For me, fieldwork has never been limited to data collection alone; it remains a lifelong process of learning, understanding, and connecting with humanity in its diverse forms.

Among your extensive work on genetics, tribal health, and bio-cultural diversity, which contributions do you consider most impactful, and why?

I believe the true fulfilment of research lies in its ability to resonate with and impact the people concerned. Throughout my academic journey, I have always tried to contribute something meaningful to the discipline. However, beyond academic recognition, I consider public engagement and public enquiry equally important, because that is where anthropology establishes its broader social relevance.

Among my works, one of the studies that received remarkable public attention was my paper on the genetic affinity of the Kayastha population using mitochondrial DNA markers, published in the American Journal of Human Biology. The study generated considerable interest not only within India but also internationally; I even received messages from individuals in Canada seeking discussions about their possible genetic roots and historical ancestry. This experience made me realise how deeply people wish to understand their biological and historical identities.

Another contribution that attracted substantial academic and public attention was my work on bio-cultural adaptations in flood-prone regions, published in Scientific Reports. That research highlighted how communities adapt biologically, socially, and culturally to recurring environmental stressors. It reinforced the importance of understanding human resilience not in isolated biological terms, but within broader ecological and cultural contexts. Over time, I have increasingly felt that anthropology becomes most relevant when it approaches questions holistically. Human problems are rarely purely biological, cultural, or environmental; they are interconnected. Therefore, our responsibility as anthropologists is to understand these complexities comprehensively and attempt solutions in an equally integrated manner. Only then does anthropology meaningfully connect with public life and contemporary societal concerns.

How do you envision the future of anthropology in India, particularly biological and molecular anthropology, in addressing contemporary global and public health challenges?

The future of anthropology in India, particularly biological and molecular anthropology, is immensely promising. India possesses extraordinary human diversity in terms of genetics, culture, ecology, language, adaptation, and population history, offering unparalleled opportunities for anthropological research. However, for this potential to truly flourish, the discipline requires more holistic and visionary planning, which, in my opinion, is still insufficiently developed.

One of my concerns is that, instead of strengthening our own disciplinary foundations, anthropology is increasingly imitating approaches from other disciplines without adequately preserving its unique identity. I observe a gradual shift from intensive field-based anthropology towards predominantly laboratory-based or software-driven anthropology. While molecular tools, genomics, artificial intelligence, and computational analyses are undoubtedly transforming research possibilities, an excessive detachment from field realities may ultimately weaken the essence of anthropology itself.

Fieldwork remains the soul of anthropology. The strength of biological and molecular anthropology should emerge from rigorous engagement with human populations in their lived socio-cultural and ecological contexts. Molecular anthropology should not become isolated from the communities it seeks to understand. Rather, advanced genomic and molecular approaches must evolve alongside detailed ethnographic observation, demographic understanding, ecological interpretation, and long-term community engagement.

India is uniquely positioned to contribute to global public health challenges through such integrative anthropology. Questions related to ageing, malnutrition, infectious diseases, microbiome diversity, climate adaptation, migration, mental health, and genetic susceptibility can only be fully understood when biology is interpreted within cultural and environmental frameworks. Anthropologists can therefore play a crucial role in developing population-specific health strategies and inclusive public health models.

I envision a future where Indian biological anthropology bridges field-based human understanding with advanced molecular science. Let molecular anthropology flourish, but under the guiding essence of true fieldwork. The biological understanding of human evolution, adaptation, and diversity should continue to emerge from deep engagement with communities, because only then can anthropology remain scientifically robust, socially relevant, and globally distinctive.

What advice would you give to young scholars and aspiring anthropologists who wish to build a meaningful and impactful career in this field?

Building a career and building a meaningful, impactful career are not always the same thing. A professional position may provide stability and recognition, but an impactful career in anthropology requires something much deeper, a long-term intellectual and emotional engagement with people, cultures, and human realities. For example, entering an institution like the Anthropological Survey of India at the entry scientific level primarily requires a Master's degree in Anthropology and qualifying examinations conducted through competitive systems. While such examinations are important, they alone cannot shape an anthropologist. Anthropology is not merely a profession; it is a way of understanding humanity through an anthropological lens. The foundations of Indian anthropology itself remind us of this. Sarat Chandra Roy, often regarded as the father of Indian ethnography, was originally trained as a lawyer. What made his contribution extraordinary was not his formal disciplinary origin, but his ability to understand the social realities of people deeply and empathetically through extensive field engagement. Similarly, Charles Darwin developed the theory of natural selection through years of observation, travel, and engagement with nature and variation. His ideas continue to influence anthropological thinking on human evolution even today.

My advice to young scholars is therefore not to limit anthropology to examination-oriented career building alone. Competitive success and institutional advancement are important, but they should progress simultaneously with the fieldwork tradition that forms the core strength of anthropology. Spend time with communities, observe patiently, listen carefully, and try to understand human life in its biological, cultural, ecological, and historical dimensions. Today, technology, molecular tools, and computational methods are expanding the discipline in exciting ways. Yet, without field-based understanding, anthropology risks losing its distinctiveness. The future anthropologist should therefore be both scientifically skilled and deeply grounded in human realities. Ultimately, meaningful anthropology emerges not only from laboratories or offices, but from sustained engagement with people and from the curiosity to understand humanity in all its diversity and complexity.

Researching Stigma in Silence: Field Reflections from HIV/AIDS Work in Eastern Uttar Pradesh

By Rohit Rai

Abstract
This reflection draws on my fieldwork experiences while conducting doctoral research on the quality of life and social stigma associated with People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLHIV) in Ghazipur district, Uttar Pradesh. While the research was conceptually grounded in understanding stigma, the field revealed that stigma operates not only at the community level but also within institutions, legal frameworks, and healthcare interactions. From negotiating research permissions under the HIV & AIDS (Prevention and Control) Act, 2017, to encountering gendered silences, participant fear, and moralised institutional language, the field became a space for ethical negotiation and reflexive learning. These experiences highlight the emotional, methodological, and structural complexities of conducting stigma research in highly sensitive public health contexts.

Keywords: HIV/AIDS, stigma, fieldwork ethics, confidentiality, PLHIV, reflexivity

Entering the Field: Permission, Fear, and Access
My fieldwork began not in communities, but in offices. Securing permission to conduct research among PLHIV proved to be one of the earliest and most prolonged challenges. The HIV & AIDS (Prevention and Control) Act, 2017, designed to safeguard the confidentiality and dignity of PLHIV, shaped institutional responses to research access in unexpected ways.

Concerned officers were reluctant to provide written approval. Many expressed apprehension that granting formal permission might expose them to legal risk in the event of any confidentiality breach. Even when I explained ethical clearance protocols, anonymization procedures, and academic intent, hesitation persisted. It was not a refusal in principle, but fear of accountability. I realized that confidentiality, while protective for patients, also produced administrative anxiety that indirectly constrained knowledge production. Field entry, therefore, required building interpersonal trust rather than relying solely on formal institutional pathways.

Identifying participants was difficult because many PLHIV actively concealed their status. Fear of disclosure shaped every interaction. Potential participants worried that speaking to a researcher might lead to gossip, family conflict, or workplace repercussions. Retention was equally complex. Conversations around stigma often resurfaced painful memories of abandonment, humiliation, and discrimination. Some participants withdrew emotionally; others disengaged from follow-ups. Fieldwork timelines had to adjust to participants' psychological readiness rather than research schedules.

Gendered Silence: Listening To What Was Not Spoken
Engaging female PLHIV required navigating layers of silence. Many women hesitated to speak openly about their experiences, particularly marital blame, domestic tensions, or discrimination within households. Even when confidentiality was assured, disclosure remained restrained.

I began to recognise silence not as an absence of experience but as a protective strategy. Patriarchal norms, fear of marital instability, and internalised stigma shaped women's reluctance to narrate suffering. Building rapport required time, patience, and ethical sensitivity to the risks embedded in speaking.

This gendered tension became more visible during a household interaction. On one occasion, while I was attempting to speak with a female PLHIV participant, her husband's brother's wife intervened in the conversation. Addressing me privately, she requested, almost pleadingly, that I "explain things" to the participant.

She stated that the PLHIV woman perceived her as a "criminal" and accused her of colluding with doctors to manipulate her HIV test report. According to her account, the participant believed that money had been paid to ensure the report came out positive and that family members were collectively harassing her through this diagnosis.

Whether the allegation emerged from misunderstanding, psychological distress, or internalised stigma was difficult to ascertain. However, the interaction revealed how an HIV diagnosis can fracture intra-family trust, producing suspicion even among women within the same household. Rather than solidarity, the diagnosis had generated blame, fear, and relational rupture.

For me as a researcher, this moment underscored that

stigma does not operate only at the community level; it permeates intimate family spaces, reshaping kinship relations and emotional alliances. It also reaffirmed how women, positioned within patriarchal family hierarchies, often become both recipients and perceived agents of blame.

Reaching Hidden Participants: Ethical Dilemmas in the Field

Not all PLHIV accessed ART centers regularly. Some had discontinued treatment; others avoided hospitals due to stigma. Reaching them required visiting residential locations. These visits were fraught with uncertainty. In several instances, individuals reacted with anger or suspicion. Despite explaining confidentiality, my presence itself was perceived as a threat to their secrecy. I became acutely aware that approaching hidden PLHIV, while methodologically valuable, could unintentionally expose them to social risk. Balancing inclusion with non-intrusion became an ethical dilemma.

One interaction during fieldwork left a lasting impression on me. While speaking with a female HIV counsellor, I inquired about a young male PLHIV who had died by suicide at the age of nineteen. My question focused on understanding the psychosocial context, including the mode of infection. Her response was unexpected. Instead of stating the transmission route clinically, she remarked that the infection had occurred through the "wrong way." On clarification, it was evident she was referring to sexual transmission. I understood the comment may have emerged from concern or moral framing common within society. Yet the phrasing revealed how biomedical facts can become moral judgments. Sexual transmission was implicitly constructed as an ethical failure rather than an epidemiological reality. This moment made me reflect on how stigma is reproduced not only in communities but also within institutional language subtly, often unintentionally.

Emotional Weight and Reflexive Learning in the Field

Fieldwork in stigma research is emotionally immersive. Listening to narratives of fear, secrecy, and loss required emotional containment. The suicide of the young participant, though encountered through secondary narration, lingered as a reminder of stigma's psychological toll. I found myself negotiating roles as researcher, listener, and witness. Maintaining professional distance while remaining ethically present was an ongoing balancing act. These field experiences reshaped my understanding of stigma. Stigma was not a singular social attitude but a layered structure operating across legal, institutional, gendered, psychological, and spatial domains. Conducting research within this landscape required methodological flexibility, ethical reflexivity, and emotional resilience.

Conclusion: Researching Stigma Within Stigma

Studying stigma required working within stigma-producing environments. Access depended on trust; data depended on emotional safety; interpretation demanded reflexivity. Fieldwork revealed that beyond measuring stigma, researchers must also navigate it within laws, institutions, language, and relationships. Recognising this complexity is essential not only for ethical research but also for designing interventions that address stigma in its structural as well as lived forms.

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The Pa: A Living Tradition among the Wancho Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh

Chandamita Pathak

Dr. Geetanjali Devi

Introductory Note

Historically youth dormitories have been among the most significant social institutions in many tribal groups of India including Northeast India which mainly functions as a centre of informal education, socialization and cultural transmission. Youth dormitories are known by different names across different communities, and under these institutions unmarried youth are trained in agricultural practices, socio-religious customs, village administration and indigenous art and craft. Although such dormitories are rapidly declining in contemporary time, still their foundational spirit continues to persist, particularly during festivals and communal gatherings. The present photo essay is a series of ten (10) photographs, based on primary fieldwork in different Wancho villages of Longding district, Arunachal Pradesh, which documents the traditional Youth dormitory, locally known as Pa, Paanu and sometimes referred to as Morung (a term widely used among the Nagas). Through visual ethnography, the essay explores the architectural form, symbolic carvings, communication instruments such as the Kham, associated megalithic practices as well as contemporary community gatherings. The photographs trace the transformation of the Pa from a martial training centred institution to a present-day space of collective decision-making and cultural continuity.

Plate 1: The "Pa" of Longkhaw, a highland village (26.77^{0}N, 95.23^{0}E; 1018 meters above sea level), stands elevated above the settlement, embodying authority, masculinity and collective memory within Wancho society. The strcuture was constructed approximately eight (8) to nine (9) years ago using locally available materials such as bamboo, wood, cane and palm leaves. It is located at a slightly higher elevation than the main residential settlement. From this elevated position, the entire village can be clearly seen. The placement highlights its social and symbolic importance within the settlement. The Pa stands not only as a physical structure but as a living institution connected to governance, community discussions and cultural identity among the Wancho people.

Plate 2: The elevated "Pa" overlooks Longkhaw village, reinforcing its spatial authority within the settlement landscape. The photograph captures a panoramic view of Longkhaw village as seen from the Pa documented in the previous photograph. The vantage point clearly illustrates the elevated positioning of the youth dormitory in relation to the settlement below. The settlement is situated within a hilly terrain and appears compact and irregular in layout. Houses are closely clustered, adapting to the contours of the landscape.

From an anthropological perspective, the elevated Pa functions as a spatial marker of authority and surveillance. Historically, such positioning would have facilitated vigilance during periods of inter-village conflict and headhunting.

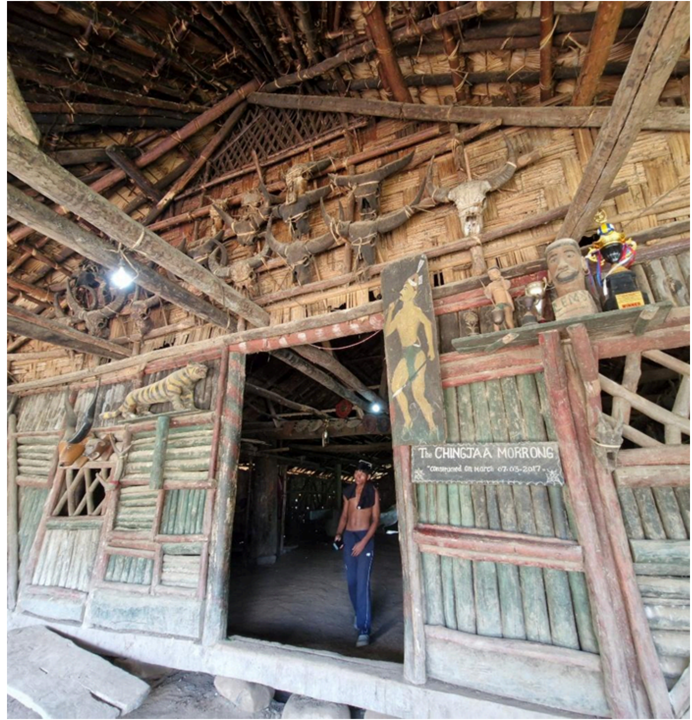


Plate 3: The front wall of the “Pa” stands as a symbol of Wancho pride and tradition, Kamhua-noknu village (26.74°N, 95.26°E; 1135 meters above sea level)

Constructed primarily of wood and bamboo the wall is prominently decorated with red and green pigments, enhancing its visual impact and ceremonial presence within the village landscape. Animal skulls, along with sculptural representations of humans and animals, symbolize masculinity, power and ancestral valour. A wooden board on the structure reads “Chingjaa Morrong, constructed on 7th March 2017,” indicating a recent reconstruction or revival. The use of the term “Morrong” reflects cultural connections with neighbouring Naga groups and contemporary efforts toward identity assertion and heritage preservation.

Plate 4: The traditional wooden instrument “Kham” preserved inside the “Pa, Longkhaw village.

The kham is made from a single large tree trunk and is long and heavy in structure, used as a communicating instrument. A wooden mortar is used to strike the instrument, which produces different types of sounds. Different rhythms and tones are played to announce various kinds of news in the villages. The villagers could understand the message by listening to the tone. The news could be related to agriculture, social gatherings, meetings, or other important matters. Today as technology advances, it is rarely used for communication, but it is still preserved inside the pa in almost every Wancho villages as an important symbol of cultural heritage and traditional knowledge.

Plate 5: Wooden sculptures carved on a large tree trunk that has opened into a flat board, inside the “Pa”.

The carvings include male figures, a single male head and various animals. The human figures may represent social roles, ancestors, or important members of society. The animals possibly represent nature, power, and traditional beliefs.

Wood carving has been practiced among the Wanchos for many generations. The detailed work on the wooden surface shows their skill and artistic knowledge. The sculptures are not only decorative, but also express cultural identity and the continuation of traditional craftsmanship.

Plate 6: Standing menhirs and stone slabs preserved near the “Pa”.

Plate 7: Skulls preserved in a tin covering in front of the “Pa”at Longkhaw village.

Three standing menhirs and several flat stone slabs are placed near the Pa, reflecting their close association with the institution. These megaliths serve as memory stones linked to the earlier headhunting tradition, where stones were erected to commemorate the bravery and victory of warriors. According to local belief, enemy heads were buried near the Pa with stone slabs placed above them. Although headhunting ceased after the spread of Christianity, these megaliths continue to be preserved in front of many Pa structures in Wancho villages.

In the past, victorious warriors brought back the severed heads of enemies as symbols of bravery and strength. Today, these remains are carefully preserved as part of the village’s historical memory. The community treats them with respect and restricts outsiders from touching or closely viewing them without permission. Their placement near the Pa reflects its historical role as a centre of warrior training. Although headhunting is no longer practiced, these preserved remains continue to symbolize ancestral history and cultural memory within the community

Plate 8: Male members of the village gathered in front of the “Pa” for discussion, Longkhaw village.

Men have gathered early in the morning to discuss matters related to jhum cultivation. Such discussions include planning agricultural activities, sharing responsibilities, and making collective decisions for the village. This photograph shows the present-day importance of the Pa. Although many traditional practices have changed over time, the Pa continues to function as a space for community meetings and decision-making. It remains an important institution where social, agricultural, and village matters are discussed.

Plate 9: The “Wanghampa” at Zedua village (26.87^{0}N and 95.29^{0}E; 713 meters above sea level) showing traditional design with modern materials.

The Wanghampa is associated with the chief (Wangham) and holds social and political importance within the village. The structure is beautifully decorated with animal skulls, reflecting the continuation of traditional symbolic practices. However, the roof is made of tin instead of traditional materials like palm leaves which shows the change in construction materials in contemporary times. Zedua village is located near Longding town, which makes it easier for villagers to access modern building materials. Although new materials such as tin are used, the traditional design and decorative elements of the Pa are still maintained.

Plate 10: “Pa” structure at Mopakhat (27.14^{0}N and 95.20^{0}E; 131 meters above sea leve) a lowland village reflecting change and continuity.

Unlike before, this Pa does not fully follow the traditional architectural style. The incorporation of concrete and other modern materials indicates the changes taking place in newer settlements. Mopakhat is located near town areas and close to the Assam border, which has influenced access to modern construction materials and new building styles. As a result, the architectural form of the Pa has undergone noticeable changes.But the tradition is still maintained. A few animal skulls are displayed outside the structure, and a broken Kham is seen inside. The Pa at Mopakhat remains associated with the celebration of the Oriah festival, which takes place before the commencement of jhum cultivation in February or March. This shows that even with architectural transformation, the Pa continues to hold ritual and social importance.

Epilogue

The Youth dormitory (Pa) of the Wancho community reflects both continuity and change within an evolving socio-cultural landscape. From its earlier association with warrior training and practices to its present role in community discussions and festivals, the Pa remains a significant institution. Although architectural forms and materials have transformed over time in few villages, its symbolic and social importance continues. Through these visual narratives, the photo essay reflects that the Pa is not merely a traditional structure of the past, but a living space where identity, heritage, and collective responsibility are continually negotiated and preserved.

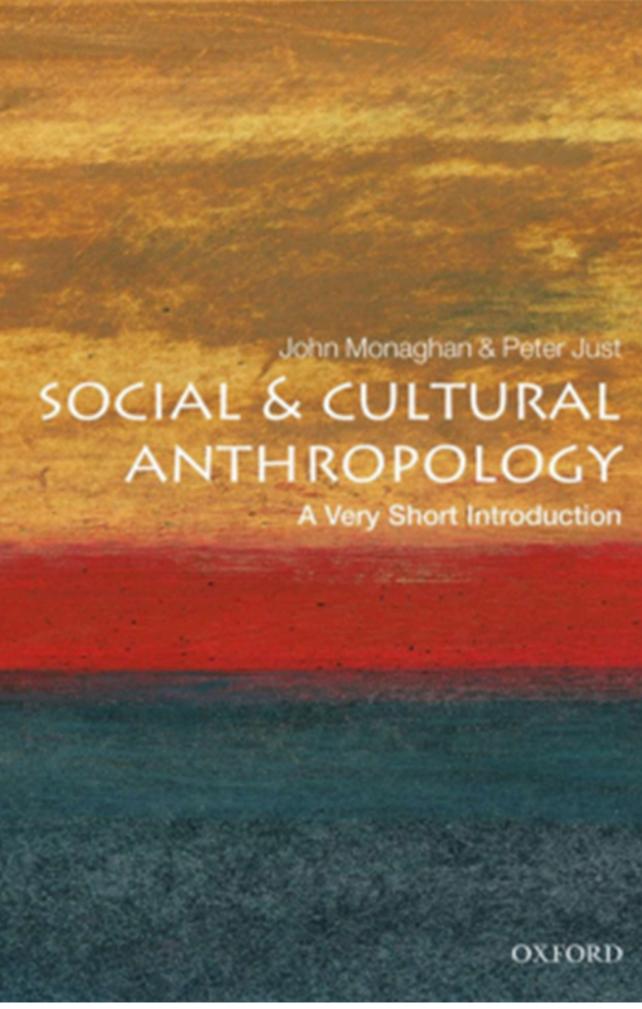
Social and Cultural Anthropology: A Very Short Introduction By Peter Just and John Monaghan

Reviewed by: Harshita Shukla

Anthropology often appears challenging to understand for readers unfamiliar with the discipline because of its diverse themes, methods, and theoretical perspectives. Social and Cultural Anthropology: A Very Short Introduction by Peter Just and John Monaghan attempts to make anthropology more accessible by presenting its key ideas in a concise and engaging manner. As part of the Very Short Introduction series, the book introduces readers to important anthropological concepts while demonstrating how anthropologists understand human societies through fieldwork and ethnographic engagement.

The book begins with a discussion on ethnography and fieldwork, which the authors present as the foundation of anthropological inquiry. One aspect that I found particularly engaging was the inclusion of Peter Just's experiences among the Dou Donggo community. Such examples make the discussion more relatable because they move beyond theoretical explanations and show how anthropological understanding develops through direct interaction and lived experience. The book effectively conveys that anthropology is not simply about studying people from a distance; rather, it involves participation, observation, and developing meaningful engagement with communities. The authors further introduce themes such as culture, society, kinship, identity, religion, and economy. These discussions highlight the ways social relationships are formed and maintained through cultural meanings and everyday practices. Instead of treating these themes as isolated concepts, the book demonstrates how they remain interconnected in shaping human life. The use of ethnographic illustrations throughout the text also helps readers understand abstract ideas through real-world contexts.

From an anthropological perspective, the book is important because it reflects one of the discipline's central strengths—the attempt to understand people within their own social and cultural worlds. Rather than merely presenting definitions and theories, the authors encourage readers to think critically about diversity, social relationships, and human experiences across cultures. In this way, the book encourages readers to understand everyday life and cultural diversity from a broader anthropological perspective. Personally, I appreciate the simplicity and clarity of the writing style. The ethnographic examples were particularly helpful in connecting theoretical ideas with practical understanding and made



the discussions more engaging. The language remains accessible without reducing the complexity of anthropological ideas. However, because of the book's concise format, some discussions remain introductory and may leave readers wanting deeper theoretical engagement. Nevertheless, this limitation seems understandable considering the purpose of the book.

Overall, this book serves as a useful introduction for students and general readers interested in anthropology. More importantly, it encourages curiosity and demonstrates how anthropological perspectives can help us understand the complexity and diversity of human life.

(Image credit: Oxford University Press book cover, accessed via Amazon

Reflection on Prof. Misra's Note on "The Ideal of Objectivity and the Reality of Subjective Experience in Anthropological Research"

By Samah K

Prof Misra's essay in the March issue of Anthro Bulletin, "The Ideal of Objectivity and the Reality of Subjective Experience in Anthropological Research" ,makes a case that subjectivity is not a contamination of the research process but an inherent condition of it. The disciplinary arc he traces, from positivist aspirations modelled on natural science through Geertz's interpretive turn to the reflexive methodologies of contemporary ethnography, is a history of a discipline slowly accepting what its own practice had always demonstrated. This reflection attempts to extend that argument, drawing on the concept of intersubjective objectivity as a framework for understanding not just why subjectivity is inevitable, but what responsible knowledge production looks like once that inevitability is accepted.

The obsession with objectivity, as Prof Misra rightly notes, was borrowed from the natural sciences. Durkheim's insistence on representing social facts "automatically," minimising interpretation to avoid the distortion of personal taste or commitment, set a template that social sciences spent much of the twentieth century trying to follow and then unlearn (Durkheim, 1982). The problem was never that researchers lacked rigour. It was that the model of rigour they were applying was designed for inanimate matter. Humans are not atoms or planets. They interpret their surroundings and act on those interpretations, creating social realities that are already layered with meaning before a researcher arrives. Giddens called this the double hermeneutic: the social scientist interprets actors who are already interpreting themselves, meaning that social phenomena are inherently shaped by the subjective understandings of both the actors being studied and the researchers attempting to comprehend them (Giddens, 1976). Prof Misra draws on Geertz to make a similar point, noting that ethnographic writing is a second-order process, interpretation built on interpretation. The researcher's cultural background, theoretical commitments, and social location are not incidental to the knowledge produced. As Breuer argues, the researcher cannot be a blank slate; they approach their research subject with prior assumptions, theoretical commitments, and a worldview shaped by their socio-political and economic contexts (Breuer, 2003).

Acknowledging that all knowledge claims are advanced from particular standpoints is not to mean that all interpretations are equally valid. Rather, credibility must be built differently, through shared scrutiny, multiple perspectives, and the willingness to make one's own position part of the record. This is what intersubjective objectivity proposes. It locates reliable knowledge in the active, accountable negotiation between the subjectivities of both researcher and researched instead of in the elimination of the researcher's standpoint. Individual experience is inherently subjective. But through interaction, communication, and the ability to understand another's perspective, shared and verifiable understandings can be constructed. It is an objectivity built on collective agreement and shared meaning, not on the fiction of a view from nowhere which is what Granek calls a "European, masculine, scientific form of modesty" that contradictorily grants epistemological and social power (Granek, 2011).

Prof Misra's treatment of the Indian context is of relevance. He identifies caste, religion, gender, and regional identity as axes that mediate both access and interpretation. Building onto that idea; a researcher studying caste carries a caste identity into the field. That identity will be read, located, and responded to before a single question is asked. Choudhary's account of a field encounter where disclosing his research topic and religious identity provoked anger from an interviewee illustrates how the research encounter is never a neutral exchange (Choudhary, 2019). The field is a social space with its own hierarchies, and the researcher enters it as a social person. Conversely, a shared identity can open doors. Either way, positionality proves to be an active variable.

Gender works the same way. Women in rural India may not discuss health issues with male interviewers, because of social rules about disclosure, rules that predate and override the researcher's methodological intentions. In such a case, is what the male researcher then produces is objective knowledge with an incidental blind spot? He might not recognise the full impact of gender-based violence or systemic inequalities if these do not align with his theoretical framework or personal understanding of social issues. The acknowledgement of this, at minimum, opens the finding to scrutiny. As Whitson argues, examining one's subjectivity opens up a consideration of emotional reactions to research, the feelings of disaffiliation and discomfort in fieldwork, and the desires researchers carry about themselves (Whitson, 2016).

The methodological practices that support intersubjective objectivity are the form this accountability takes in practice. Reflexivity asks researchers to treat their own position as part of the record; through an "epistemology of the hyphen," researchers are inherently intertwined with their subjects, allowing empathy and care in the research relationship (Granek, 2011). Triangulation distributes the risk of a single perspective by bringing multiple methods, data sources, and viewpoints into contact, validating data and strengthening the quality of findings in qualitative studies. Thick description produces accounts rich enough that readers can follow the interpretive process and evaluate it, allowing readers to understand the webs of significance in which behaviours are embedded and bridging the gap between the observer's perspective and the lived experience of subjects. Peer review extends this outward, subjecting findings to collective scrutiny and refining scholarly work towards a consensus within the scientific community. None of these practices eliminates subjectivity. They make it visible, testable, and productive. Like Prof Misra concludes that subjectivity, when subjected to critical reflection, emerges as a methodological strength rather than a limitation; the divergence between what respondents consider important knowledge and what researchers seek to extract is the ordinary condition of fieldwork, and accounting for can make knowledge socially responsible. The pursuit of knowledge in social sciences is a uniquely human endeavour, studying human life by humans. To pretend otherwise leads to shallow and misleading understandings of social life (Granek, 2011). Knowledge produced through intersubjective objectivity is knowledge that we, as a self-correcting and fallible community of enquirers, can create with accountability.

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Superb Sunita, many many congratulations 🌷🌷🌷 Well done team AIF👏👏👏👏

-Prof Shalina Mehta

Thank you, all seniors n friends, we are trying to put our best efforts, and seek your support. Sunita with two senior and three interns is able to come with monthly edition, congrats to her efforts, then institution like manav sanghralya with a system should do its duty to share with its stakeholders it's works.

-Prof Amitabh Pande

Colourful and very innovatively designed. Very good articles. One on chhena poda is superb. Congratulations Sunitha Madam and best wishes always 💐💐

-Dr. Khirod Chandra Moharana

Congratulations Anthro Bulletin..excellent as usual with rich varied information.

-Prof S.B Roy

Hearty congratulations to Professor Pandeyji and Professor Sunita Reddy. Well done. Keep it up.

-Prof PK Misra

Great way to share your good work Drs Sunita Reddy and APandey. Your timely bulletine would many others know about Anthro work. I small sure you would have a long list of people and institutes who receive it through your mailing list. Can I request you to add all institutes of ICMR , Medical college, Medical council, FOGYC, Dental councils, AYUSH, funding agencies like CSIR, DST, DBT, ICSSR, ICAR etc.

- Dr Nita Mawa

FORTHCOMING EVENT

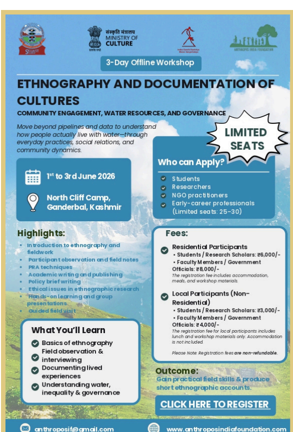
- An online lecture will be organised as a part of our Distinguished Guest lecture series.

For updates, please follow our website's events page- **https://events.anthroposindiafoundation.com/**

- AIF with IGRMS, Bhoal is jointly organizing a **Three-Day Offline Workshop on Ethnography and Documentation of Cultures: Community Engagement, Water Resources and Governance at North Cilf Camp, Ganderbal.**

  Date: 1st - 3rd June, 2026

  For more details - **Click here**



Registration Link: **Click here**

PAST EVENT

- For our Distinguished Guest lecture series, an online lecture was organised and delivered by **Dr. Mithun Sikdar** on **29th May 2026 at 5:30 pm onwards**

For more details - **Click here**

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- As a part of International Musuem Day 2026 Celebrations, an Online Guest Lecture was organised by IGRMS and AIF, on the theme **"Museums as Cultural Bridges: Connecting Communities in a Divided World"** on 18th May 2026 at 3:30pm IST onwards.

For more details **- Click here**

FELLOWSHIPS AND JOB ALERTS

1. ICMR Call for Proposals 2026-27 - Funding & Research Opportunity

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NEW!

We are thrilled to announce the collaboration between Anthropos India Foundation (AIF) and Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS) to bring a series of offline workshops on "Ethnography and documentation of culture." We are excited to host the third workshop of this series in Kashmir in June 2026 — with many more to come!

Let's learn, grow, and celebrate anthropology together!

Please feel free to share your write-ups, comments and suggestions with us at aif.newsletter2025@gmail.com.

Three-Day Offline Workshop on Ethnography and Documentation of Culture

The Three-Day Offline Workshop on Ethnography and Documentation of Culture was held from 12–14 April 2026 at the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL), Mysore. Jointly organized by Anthropos India Foundation (AIF), Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS), SRC Mysore, and CIIL, it marked the second workshop in the series focusing on immersive ethnographic research and cultural documentation.

Local Health Traditions in India: Recognition, Legitimate Space and Policy Pathways Conference

The Local Health Traditions in India: Recognition, Legitimate Space and Policy Pathways conference was held on 22–23 April 2026 at Bharat Ki Soch Foundation, Thapar House, New Delhi. Jointly organized by Anthropos India Foundation (AIF), Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS), and Bharat Ki Soch, the event focused on formulation of a policy document for advancing dialogue around local health traditions & healers along with policy pathways in India.

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