

Anthropology in India: From Colonial Beginnings to Innovative Futures

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ABSTRACTS (In alphabetical order by speaker name)

CHAKRAVARTY, Professor Kalyan Kumar.

Title: Using Museums for Demuseumization

A movement for using museums, for demuseumization of the community habitats, supposedly represented by them, has been steered in India, for transforming the approach of Indian museums, from that of treating Indian communities, their habitats, knowledge systems, culture and arts, as objects rather than subjects of anthropological research and ventures. Initiatives have been taken to reverse the museumizing process of substitution of invented spatial, temporal, dynastic categories, as frozen museum texts, for living community contexts. These initiatives have been undertaken for decolonizing the colonial approach of treating rural custodians of their heritage, as effete anthropological objects, irrelevant for national development, as dynamic and agentive subjects. An effort has been made to change the analogous occidental view and treatment of the Orient, as an anthropological backwater, good only for museum display, irrelevant to human progress, guided by Occidental civilization.

The seeds of a project of marginalization and museumization of Indian communities, as oriental objects for occidental exploitation, was sown in the Kolkata Asiatic Society initiative of museum development, guided by the colonial British Government, in India. The Asiatic Society undertook an initiative to study and appropriate everything, produced by man and nature, through geological, archaeological, botanical, zoological surveys, at the instance of the colonial government. These surveys fragmented human and natural resources in artificial categories, bifurcated arts and crafts, aesthetic beauty and practical utility, community contexts and museum texts, for exploitation of community resources, for the British Empire. The surveys, have been mirrored in the artificial division of galleries, ignoring the connections of objects in community life. Following such surveys, in the Indian Museum, Kolkata, exhibitions of so-called oriental culture, in western exhibitions, were done in the National Museum, Delhi, even after independence. This colonial approach of theoretical and practical museumization of the Orient has been blindly followed, in structuring the plethora of museums, created in post-Colonial India. This has been done without critically reviewing the western historiography of Indian art and culture, and, the colonial theory and practice of museology, which have marginalized Indian community habitat, art, culture, history, as peripheral to the western model of human progress, market-oriented development and cultural evolution, which have placed the Occident at the acme, the Orient at the bottom. As part of rethinking this colonial approach of divesting the colonized subjects of autonomy, in the theory and practice of development and progress, the colonial museum model has been revisited in India. Attempts have been made, to restore agency to communities, through museums, as guides in the culture of development, at Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalya, Bhopal, Purkhauti Muktangan at Raipur, district, village, community-based museums, in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, Indira Gandhi

National Center for Arts, National Museum and Lalit Kala Akademi in Delhi, Kolkata Center for Creativity, and, in tribal freedom fighters' museums, all over India. Exhibitions and initiatives, undertaken at these museums and art centers have been developed, with community collaboration, as against the colonial museum model, excluding communities from curatorial agency. In these museums, community habitats have been demonstrated, as living nurseries and mirrors of a post- colonial, micro environmental, poly cultural developmental ethic. This effort has accompanied the reorganization, in collaboration with communities, of the strategies of display, education and outreach at museums, for demonstrating community micro developmental alternatives, as viable, against unsustainable, globalizing, homogenizing mega developmentalism. Coincidentally, the use of technology, in such post- colonial museums, has been reordered, in India, for advancing community ecology wisdom traditions, instead of creating spectacles, to amuse or stun urban visitors, unfamiliar with the wealth of community heritage in rural India. These museums have been codirected by communities, to mirror community approaches of sustainable management of human and natural resource management, in the rural commons, as against continuing colonizing strategies of corporate, mega developmental, homogenizing, market- oriented lobbies, for exploiting and appropriating community resources, to aggrandize the global commons and its beneficiaries. Details will be provided, of the field strategies, developed by the communities, in partnership with the museums, developed in post- colonial India, as active rather than passive agents, for guiding the transformation of the Indian museums, from dead repositories of civilizational detritus, into dynamic harbingers of biocultural diversity and development. Pan Asiatic dimensions, have been given to this movement for de museumization, to demonstrate its potential, for turning the colonially generated approach of anthropology, on its head. This potential can be opened up, as explored successfully, by replicating the community steered movement of de museumization in India, with local adaptations. This can be strategized, by combining collection and exhibition of objects, with recollection and regeneration of living traditions, animating them; by taking the museums out to the communities, instead of merely persuading communities to visit the museums; by reading the meaning of extant museum charters, in terms indigenous to community contexts, instead of reading meanings into them, borrowed from alien texts; and, by undertaking participative, action research, hand in hand with communities, rather than by studies of such communities, as mere objects, devoid of dynamism or agency.

CHANNA, Professor Subhadra Mitra

Title: Anthropology in India: From the Colonial Past to Innovative Futures

Anthropology was introduced in India by the administrator-intellectuals whose object was both the pursuit of knowledge and the possible use of such knowledge for political control. The British were joined by the first generation of European educated elite Indian men, who initially joined these institutes such as the Asiatic Societies and Anthropological Societies as compatriots of the British intellectuals but were soon diverted to both defending their own civilizational status as well as forming critical evaluations of the manner in which India was viewed and interpreted by the colonial academics. There were internally evolving critiques of forms of rule, such as land ownership laws, of externally imposed typologies such as 'tribe' and 'caste'; even as much of the teaching of anthropology followed the British or American Schools of thought. Over a period of time, the teaching of anthropology transformed bringing

in more issues that were specific to Indian conditions, such as the study of the Adivasis (tribes) and the dynamics of caste and kinship, studies of gender and of marginalization and internal hierarchies. Slowly, as the generations shifted, newer perspectives like those of environment, urbanization, sexuality and inequality entered the intellectual repertoire and fresh perspectives emerged on conventional areas such as museums and study of material culture, archaeology and prehistory and religion. The most significant transformation in knowledge production is now the emergence of academics from those sections of society who were earlier treated only as ‘objects’ of scrutiny, the people of the hills and from the villages, the tribes and adivasis and those from the social margins of caste and class. Their interpretations are forming an effective critique of the earlier elitist versions of Indian society and point towards a vibrant future for anthropology in India.

CHOPHY, Dr G. Kanato, Department of Anthropology, Dibrugarh University, Assam, India.

Title: Anthropology in India’s North-East Frontier

This article examines the trajectory of anthropology in India’s North-East, delving into two important historical processes: firstly, the colonial state’s unfinished project of frontier expansion, and secondly, anthropology as a joint enterprise of knowledge production, highlighting key stakeholders, namely the native elites, colonial political agents, missionaries, and European observers. The article also critically examines the existence of two distinct societies – the hill and valley dwellers – peculiar to the region, which impelled the practitioners of anthropology to reimagine the conception of Indian society, pushing the methodological and disciplinary boundaries. I argue that the anthropological knowledge production has far-reaching influence on the contemporary ethnic relations, policymaking, and nation-building in North-East India. Drawing on a wide range of sources, including colonial records, military reports, tour diaries, missionary accounts, and monographs, this article seeks to explore the role of colonial apparatuses, imperial ideology, and the state-making process in the development of anthropology in North-East India.

KHATTRI, Dr Prashant; Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Allahabad, Praygarj-211002. Email- prashant_khattri@allduniv.ac.in.

Title: Environmental Anthropology in India: An Exploration into its Past, Present and Future Directions

The paper tries to explore environmental dimensions in anthropological writings in India by Indian anthropologists. For the sake of clarity and brevity, the paper will be divided into six sub-themes exploring different dimensions of environmental anthropology in India. To begin with, there are anthropological writings following the functional tradition that envisaged environment as an integral part of tribal or adivasi worldview. Studies on tribal belief systems, health care, magic and religion comes under this section. The second theme deals with the works where colonial impact on the environment is outlined. This will include that how colonial rulers affected environment through policies and how that affected the lives of people. The third theme deals with how the idea of development has affected and altered the environment. This will also include right of Indian tribes over their environment and how state has largely responded to it. The fourth theme will talk about how anthropological studies have visualized natural disasters and their impacts on human populations. This will also include issues of climate change and the resulting political ecology that influences both rural and urban landscapes. The fifth theme will talk about multispecies ethnographies that will focus upon

how the natural world acts upon the human being as an active agent. The sixth theme will talk about the relationship between the environment and the marginal or the subaltern groups. This will include how dalit communities and women have interacted with their environment and how power relations and patriarchy has influenced it. The paper will then discuss the future direction in which environmental anthropology in India is heading.

KUMAR, Professor Pushpesh; Dept of Sociology, University of Hyderabad, pushpesh.kumar@gmail.com

Title: Indian Anthropology and Sexuality: Feminist and Queer Interventions

Given the overlap and proximity between Indian social anthropology and sociology, this paper sketches feminist and, more recently, queer interventions through ethnographic engagements. Though feminism arrived in the Indian academia with the institutionalisation of Women's Studies following the landmark 'Towards Equality' Report in the mid-1970s, exposing the harsh realities of women and girls in India, the women-centric ethnographies began in the 1940s and 1950s with pioneering work by Cathleen Gough (1954, 1961) reflecting female sexuality in a matrilineal context. Such interventions never looked back with Leela Dube, Pauline Kolenda, Karin Kapadia, Patricia Uberoi, Janaki Abraham, Anuja Agarwal, Kalpana Ram, Lucinda Ramberg, Shalini Grover, and my own work, and with many other young scholars, inter alia, have foregrounded their ethnographies of female sexuality. As it is obvious that these cited works could not transcend heterosexual relations and heteronormativity, and remained confined to the male-female binary. A few American anthropologists and their India-centered ethnographies attempted to break this barrier. The works of Serena Nanda and Gayatri Reddy first come to mind; their legacy is carried forward in the works of Anil Dutta, Ahonna Roy, Pushpesh Kumar, Rubani Yumkhaibam, and in the work of many new scholars in the process of their doctoral research and publication. The paper aims to historicise and map out feminist and queer interventions in Indian anthropology.

MATHUR, Professor Nita Professor of Sociology and Director, School of Social Sciences Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, INDIA.

Title: Consumer Culture in India: Historical trajectories, Contemporary Transformations, and Future Research Agenda

Consumer culture has had a persuasive presence in India more so since couple of decades. The present form of consumer culture bears the imprint of colonial legacy, nationalist movement, and, among others, economic reforms of the 1990s. What makes consumer culture in India distinctive is its trajectory rooted not in industrial capitalism but in multiple processes wherein traditional values coexist, in fact, provide substratum to modern consumption aspirations. Importantly, consumer culture shapes and is, in turn, shaped by cultural norms, social hierarchies, and symbolic meanings attached to goods and services.

The chapter will trace the routeway of consumer culture in India from subsistence to contemporary hyper-consumerism in a globalized digital economy. It will critically examine how and in what way consumption practices negotiate with values, beliefs, norms, class structures, and technological advancements. Drawing on interdisciplinary research primarily in domains of sociology, anthropology, and economics, the chapter will examine contemporaneous trends including digital consumption, premiumization, sustainability, and rural market expansion. It will conclude by identifying critical concerns for future research,

including ethical consumption, environmental sustainability, and the politics of aspiration in a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape.

NARAYAN Professor Badri, Vice-Chancellor TISS, Mumbai.

Title: Caste and Social Justice: Various Models in India.

Indian Anthropology has not paid much attention to writing ethnographies of various invisible castes from among the marginal and dalit communities of India. In my chapter for the volume on Indian Anthropology, I wish to raise the question as to why the invisibility among the marginal castes was not foregrounded by the Indian anthropologists, who mostly preferred to write about caste from an upper caste perspective. This invisibility is present even when we search for dalit and marginal caste representatives in academics, who are poorly represented in the departments of anthropology across the country. They also remain largely politically invisible as well, in spite of positive discrimination policies being in place for decades. In this presentation I will narrate an ethnographic story about how a most marginal and almost invisible caste like the Musahar in the Northern part of India managed to acquire visibility through self-mobilisation and an assertive movement towards the goal of social justice. My work on this community is a contribution towards bringing into focus the marginal voices hitherto left largely unheard in anthropological literature.

NATH, Dr Suman, Department of Anthropology, Government General Degree College, Keshiary, Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal, India sumananthro1@gmail.com

Title: Political Anthropology – the Indian Story

The arguable beginning of the subdiscipline of political anthropology concerns the anthropological field-based revelation of embeddedness of power-authority and decision making in everyday life and in a wide-ranging social institution other than strictly the government and politics. Consequently, political anthropology has an all-encompassing character and has a wider influence going beyond the discipline of anthropology. With the increasing realisation of the political nature of their work, anthropologists for the last four decades have renewed focus on political anthropology resulting in two major traditions, first, the one that looks at the political institutions and their operationalisations and the second one influenced French post-structuralist theory primarily advocated by Foucault which looks at the ways in which history is written, and how everyday can be seen as political. Further, there is a loose third trend that looks at politics as a social category experienced and documented through practice, often inspired by Bourdieu. Looking at the rich tradition of ethnographically inspired works, India has a diverse array of studies on political anthropology primarily by anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists. The chapter captures the essential nature of Indianness in Political Anthropology from the contextualisation of power in traditional categories such as caste, tribe and religion. With an overview of the theorisation of power from the Indian experience, the chapter shows how the ideas generated through ethnographic works in India have wider connotations. The chapter ends with an attempt to show the possible future of Indian anthropology, the voids which need to be filled and the challenges the discipline would face.

PAPPU, Dr Shanti^{1,2} and **KUMAR, Dr Akhilesh**¹

1. Sharma Centre for Heritage Education, No.4 School Road, Shollinganallore, Chennai 600114, Tamil Nadu
2. SIAS, Krea University, 5655, Central Expressway, Sri City, Andhra Pradesh 517646 India

Title: From Tools to Thoughts: A Historiography of Palaeolithic Archaeological Research in India

Here, we discuss a historiography of Palaeolithic archaeology in India, with a focus on major transformations in theoretical and methodological approaches. These transformations in intellectual and institutional history have led to diverse interpretations of hominin migration, behaviour and adaptation to Pleistocene climatic changes over the past century. We discuss the influence of differing schools of archaeology, both foreign and Indian, that have shaped the discipline's narrative, situating these within the context of funding sources and publication structures. Through time, these conceptual shifts are represented in approaches towards lithics moving from tool-type lists to interpretations of cognition and behaviour.

We examine the first phase of colonial encounters with Indian prehistory, dominated by the work of Robert Bruce Foote, who discovered the first Palaeolithic artefact in 1863 and subsequently established the foundations of the discipline in the subcontinent. We highlight the close interaction with contemporary 19th-century discoveries and conceptual approaches in European prehistory. Subsequent research spanning the 1930s, particularly that dominated by the Yale-Cambridge Expedition and other teams, had implications for interpretations across the subcontinent extending to influence conceptual developments in East and Southeast Asian prehistory.

We highlight shifts occurring post-Independence, with the development of research arising from universities and government bodies, with a growing emphasis on building local cultural and environmental sequences, and the first major efforts to establish cultural nomenclatures. Subsequent influences drawn from processual and ecological theoretical perspectives, the growth of interdisciplinary research projects, and a focus on geoarchaeological, palaeoenvironmental, genetic and chronological issues led to the transformation of the discipline into what is seen today. With increasing chronological controls, and debates on extreme events and environments, a gradual shift in interpretive frameworks is evident, with debates focusing on hominin migration out of Africa, leading to more publications situating India in a global context.

We conclude with recent research, focusing on paradigm shifts arising from chronological breakthroughs, methodological transformations in both digital and computational methods and theoretical approaches. We discuss how Western approaches towards cultural nomenclatures imposed on the Indian record, are being revised in light of new discoveries and conceptual frameworks, thereby leading to major revisions in our understanding of evolutionary trajectories within the Indian Palaeolithic. We conclude with a discussion on the conservation of prehistoric sites in India and issues related to public outreach and science communication.

SUMATHI Prof. Dr. S. and MUNIRAJ, Dr. M. Department of Anthropology, University of Madras, Chepauk – Chennai.

Title: Anthropology in Action: Engaged Ethnography, Policy Intervention, & the Socio-Legal Dynamics of Reservations in India

The concept of 'application' in the social sciences carries a complex and contested intellectual history. Applied anthropology was conceived as the direct translation of scientific knowledge into policy recommendations, a top-down, technocratic model premised on the authority of expert knowledge. These formulations were subjected to sustained critique in the latter half of the twentieth century; scholars questioned the power relations embedded in expert-community relations. On the other hand, public anthropology and practicing anthropology simultaneously evolved with methodological and epistemological orientations that are distinguished by their commitment to collaborative, action-oriented social research. The participatory approach established its commitment to epistemic justice, proving the relevance of the marginalized communities' indigenous knowledge/local perspective/world view about their own social conditions. Unlike earlier models, engaged anthropology does not bracket normative commitments in the name of scientific neutrality; it openly advocates for structural changes while maintaining rigorous scholarly ethnographic standards. At the grassroots level, engaged anthropology has made significant contributions to community empowerment, legal literacy, community identity, and policy advocacy. These universal theories and practises provided a unique research space for Indian anthropologists that translates into meaningful interventions at the community level. Central to this inquiry is the analysis of India's Positive Discrimination framework encompassing Scheduled Tribes (ST), Scheduled Castes (SC), and Other Backward Classes (OBC), trying to utilise the reservation through socio-legal apparatus by narrating their sociocultural construct.

The paper addresses the crucial socio-legal aspects of reservations as a quota system, the challenges in achieving holistic enumeration of marginalised communities and the existing community scheduling, the problem of establishing contemporary community identity, the validation of theoretical ethnography and new ethnography, and the issues related to utilization of constitutional benefits. The case study of Tamil Nadu empirically narrates the unique epistemic position of an engaged anthropologist who tried to bridge the gap between theoretical abstraction and resolve the lived socio-legal realities of the vulnerable communities through various government-formulated committees. It further gives scope for the Indian engaged anthropologist to be involved in technological interventions and policy assessment studies at the international level and try to reshape the beneficiary classification.

THOMAS, Professor Renny

Title: Studying 'Religion' in Indian Anthropology

This paper aims to discuss the various ways in which 'religion' as a category was discussed, studied and theorized in Indian sociology and social anthropology. Anthropology of religion is perhaps one of the most noted specialisations within Anthropology which produced important theoretical debates and raised pertinent methodological concerns in Anthropology as a discipline. The rethinking of religion as a universal category as it is discussed by Talal Asad is a noted intervention, followed by various important scholarly contributions on understanding religion. Social theorists and philosophers have also engaged with the question of religion in sociology and anthropology to understand the nature and genealogy of these modern disciplines. The philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah (2025) has observed recently that the earlier figures in sociology and anthropology including Tylor, Durkheim and Weber were not studying religion merely as an object of inquiry, rather the very foundation of their theories of society emerged from religion, and both religion and society were not treated separately. Keeping these genealogies and intervention in mind, and following the works of anthropologists like Geertz, this chapter aims to discuss how religion became an object of

inquiry in Indian Anthropology. I do that by looking at select ethnographic works on religion in India from various time periods and discuss the key questions they raise in understanding Indian society. For the purpose of this chapter, I will be looking at the ethnographic writings on religion by anthropologists including L. K. Ananthakrishna Aiyar, Irawati Karve, L. P. Vidyarthi, M. N. Srinivas, A. Aiyappan, T. N. Madan, and few other contemporary social anthropologists who discussed different religious traditions from diverse standpoints of caste, religion, region and gender.

Renny Thomas is an Assistant Professor of Sociology and Social Anthropology at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER) Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. He is the author of *Science and Religion in India: Beyond Disenchantment* (2021), and co-editor of *Mapping Scientific Method: Disciplinary Narrations* (2022) and *Decolonial Keywords: South Asian Thoughts and Attitudes* (2025). He was the Taki Visiting Global Professor at New York University, New York (2024-2025) and has been a Visiting Fellow at the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Cultural History at the Friedrich Schiller University, Jena, Germany (2022-2023), and the Charles Wallace Fellow in Social Anthropology at Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland, UK (2017-2018). His research interests and published works are broadly in the fields of Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Anthropology of Religion.

ZAMAN, Dr Rukshana; Associate Professor, Faculty of Anthropology, School of Social Sciences, Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi-India.

Title: Ethnographic Work in India: Fieldwork, Reflexivity and Positionality

The genesis of anthropology in India began as the study of the 'other' during the colonial period. The 'other' here were the Indians themselves who were being studied as the 'natives' whose data mostly served administrative purposes. Early phases of anthropological data about the Indian subcontinent came from either the administrators or the 'white' anthropologists. Some of the early works were by administrators like H.H. Risley, Sir. Edward Gait etc. who worked with census data, followed by monographs like *The Andaman Islanders: A study in social anthropology* (1922) by A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, *The Naked Nagas* (1950) by Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, Verrier Elwin and his works to name a few. These works though classics left a lot to the imagination of the reader; as in most cases the explicit photographs and accounts presented an 'exotic' image of the other.

With the coming of age and the entry of the 'native' ethnographer in the field, the ethnographic gaze turned to the self rather than the 'other'. The native ethnographers were now reading the earlier written records which presented the outsider's view rather than the insider's view. Thus, the native anthropologists brought in- lived-experiences, reflexivity and the positionality of the ethnographer in the field to the forefront. Reflexivity in anthropology was the outcome of three critical episodes; firstly, around the 1960s the acceptance by the discipline that anthropology was European-centric, based on grounded evidences from earlier ethnographies. Second, was the emergence of the feminist movement that highlighted the lack of the women's voice in the earlier ethnographies and finally, the publication of Malinowski's 'A Diary in the strict sense of the term' that revealed his subjectivity which did not reflect in the monograph.

This paper is an attempt to present some of the native ethnographies that has been written with an insider's view wherein the participants at times were the 'self'. The presentation draws from

empirical experiences of anthropologists working among their own; bringing in their lived experiences, trials and tribulations, their reflexivity and positionality in the field.