

ANTHRO BULLETIN

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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**.

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The Cultural Pulse of August: Celebrations, Rituals and Remembrances

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

Dear Readers,

Do you know, the very name “August” comes from Emperor Augustus of Rome, symbolizing authority, power, and respect? Socially, it often represents a time of gathering (festivals, family reunions, community celebrations). Culturally, it is a bridge month—between the height of summer and the gradual approach of autumn (Northern Hemisphere), or winter and spring (Southern Hemisphere).

The month of August carries rich social and cultural significance across the world, shaped by history, religion, seasonal cycles, and political milestones. In the Northern Hemisphere, August is traditionally linked with harvest time like, grains, fruits, vegetables. In Europe, the “dog days of summer” (peak heat) fall in July–August, influencing folklore, rituals, and community gatherings. In Japan, Obon Festival, honoring ancestors, usually falls in mid-August. The month is also associated with vacations and travel in many Western countries, schools are closed, workplaces slow down, and it’s a peak holiday month. Many music, art, and cultural festivals for e.g., Edinburgh Festival in Scotland, Notting Hill Carnival in London, SAIL in Amsterdam this year were held in August.

In Christianity, the ‘Feast of the Assumption of Mary’ (15th August) is one of the most important Catholic celebrations, and according to the lunar Islamic calendar, some years Muharram (Islamic New Year) or Ashura fall in August. In Hinduism, the festivals like Raksha Bandhan, Janmashtami (birth of *Krishna*), and sometimes Ganesh Chaturthi fall in August, depending on the lunar calendar.

The national significance of India, the 15th August marks freedom from British rule in 1947, is deeply embedded in the nation’s collective memory and celebrated with flag hoisting, cultural programs, and patriotic events.

The festivities of Raksha Bandhan, celebrating sibling bonds and Janmashtami, commemorates Lord *Krishna*’s birth, celebrated with fasting, songs, dances, and “*Dahi Handi*” are to be seen to enjoy the youth and their collective spirit.

Onam in Kerala, sometimes in late August/early September is a harvest festival with boat races, dances, and feasts. While August often coincides with the monsoon’s peak, bringing relief from summer heat but also symbolizing fertility, growth, and renewal in agrarian life. Many universities reopen or begin new academic sessions, making it a transitional period in educational and social calendars.

One of the festivals, I witnessed in South is the *Shravan Shukravaralu* (Fridays in the month of Shravana, usually July–August in the Hindu lunar calendar) hold deep religious, social, and cultural significance, especially in

Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra. It is considered highly auspicious in Hindu tradition. It is dedicated to Lord Shiva and also associated with Goddess Parvati, Lakshmi, and Gowri. Women keep fast, special prayers, and rituals are observed, especially on Mondays (*Shravana Somvar*) for Lord Shiva and Fridays (*Shravana Shukravaralu*) for Goddess worship.



Shravan Shukravaralu is dedicated to Goddess *Mahalakshmi* / *Gowri* / *Parvati*. Women observe fasts (*vrata*) and perform special *poojas* for the well-being of their families, prosperity, and marital happiness. Women decorate their homes with mango leaves, *rangoli*, flowers, and set up *kalasham* (sacred pot) symbolizing Goddess *Lakshmi*. Women wear new *saris*, bangles, flowers, and there is a festive air in neighborhoods. Offerings of *prasadam* (*poornam boorelu*, *payasam*, *pulihora*, etc.) are made. These women-centered rituals emphasize the role of women in maintaining family welfare, prosperity, and social harmony. It is also a time for bonding among women—they gather for collective prayers, exchange *tamboolam* (betel leaves, kumkum, bangles), and strengthen community ties. Songs, folklore, and devotional storytelling - *harikatha* are part of the cultural fabric of these Fridays. Since, Shravana coincides with the monsoon season—a time of agricultural fertility, worship of *Lakshmi* (goddess of wealth and abundance) is symbolically tied to prosperity of crops and harvest. Friday (*Shukravaralu*) is astrologically ruled by *Shukra* (Venus), associated with love, fertility, prosperity, and feminine energy. Observing *vrata*s on these days is believed to bring, *Sowbhagyam* (marital bliss), *Sampada* (wealth and prosperity), *Santanam* (children and family well-being).



Embodied Identity

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

"Body as an inscribed surface of Events"

- Michael Foucault

Dear Friends,

Few months ago, I had the occasion to evaluate an excellent Ph.D. thesis on Marriage among the Konyak Naga of Nagaland by Amo Konyak B, submitted to NEHU, Shillong. It was after years; I had the opportunity to read through a classic ethnographic account that used to be the norm when anthropology was in its infancy in independent India from 1950s to 1970s. As you may infer, it was nearly an autoethnographic account akin to fascinating narrative by *Ashani Dhar* in this issue of the Bulletin titled "Contours of Exile: Field Narratives from Jagati, Jammu and Delhi-NCR". These autoethnographic accounts are imperative both from the perspective of providing epistemological inputs but also as anthropology's unique contribution to the documentation of cultural historicity and transformational landscape. Narrative Methodology filtered through the Lens of reflexivity used in these studies map both tangible and intangible contents of changing cultural trajectories. Text of the thesis provoked me "to dwell on the metamorphosis of tattooing as a 'cultural construction of the inscribed body'. In her research, Konyak briefly refers to now obsolete tradition of headhunting that was "done to acquire tattoo marks as a rite of passage or initiation of males into the paan/jen"-an exclusive male club of celebrated warriors. In 1935, when head hunting was banned by the British in the administered areas and emblems of Christianity became community signifiers, unique inscription body art of tattoo also gradually effaced^[1]. It is important here to emphasize that body inscriptions were often viewed by western philosophy and followers of Christianity as part of the exotica and pagan belief system. It will be of interest for young scholars to note that John Bulwer, a practicing protestant Christian doctor in his classic work titled "*Anthrometamorphosis*" first published in 1650 (republished in 1653), created an ideological narrative for the following three centuries to view body inscriptions as, "exotic uncivilized other in comparison to the ideal civilized and Christian European". Though Christian missionaries first came to Konyak homeland in 1840 and tried religious and cultural conversion, their presence and imposition of their belief system was determinedly resisted. Perseverance of several cultural traditions, rituals and belief systems is a manifestation of their steely resolve to protect indigeneity. Christianity spread in the region only in the 1950s making indents in local cultural belief systems and values accompanying it. Colonial legislations by itself could not penetrate rooted cultural practices or rewrite cultural history of a community. Levi Strauss (1963, p.257) describing Maori tattooing aptly labelled it as "a stamp onto the mind of all traditions and philosophy of the group"; and Gell (1993, p. 39) describing Polynesian tattoo tradition denoted it as a "double skin folded over itself"; and elucidates it further as, "simultaneously the exteriorization of the interior which is simultaneously the interiorization of the exterior". These are profound inferences that summarize what Bourdieu (1977) elucidates as "socially informed Bodies".

In simpler terms body inscriptions became written stories on physical self, reconstructing 'self for the others' and reappropriating it for identity assertion. World view ascribed by these constructs weaved network of relations between the

self and the community. It reconfigured not only cultural and social boundaries, but also power plays and political arena. In the feminist discourse, it conveyed gendered identities and hierarchies^[2]. Embodied identities in the processes of historicity of cultural transformations tell multiple stories. They define boundaries



within the larger context of the community, e.g. Konyak have two distinct sub-communities, one with Tattoo marks known as *Thendu* and those without the privilege of having earned these prestigious bodily inscriptions, having a 'white face' known as *Thentho* (Konyak & Zhim. 2022, p.61). They become imprints not only for defining relations between the individual and society but also for illustrating relations between different societies. Totemic inscriptions become conduits between the self and the divine and, paradoxically, as magical and medicinal practices.

Complexities of these body inscriptions are marked by contradictory processes of celebration of personhood as well as denial of personhood, often defined as branding. Inhuman marking of prisoners in Nazi camps, used to distinguish 'social deviants' from other citizens, was an instrument used for inflicting humiliation and subjugation. Its usage in criminology for surveillance and control in Australia, Russia, Asia, British colonial India and several other parts of the World is well recorded.

For decades, under the influence of various ideological strands and the abstract and ambiguous positioning of modernity, tattoos lost their relevance as a 'second skin'. Lutz and Collins (1993) reviewed it as a "major trope in identifying both non-Western people and the subaltern exotic within the West". It is a subject that can engage us for hours on end. My angst is with the way so-called "tattoo renaissance" (Rubin, 1988) has infected young and adventurous spirits cutting across cultural, social and national boundaries. Tattoo artists are exploiting knowledge domains of tattooists -the original architects of iconic symbols that narrated stories and captured cultural histories, without acknowledging the contributions made by them or referring to the contexts in which these were created. The tattooists belonging to indigenous communities all over the World are languishing in pecuniary. Their original designs and even pigments that are known to have medicinal values and should have had patent rights are usurped. Civilizational histories are ruptured, and objectification of the exotic is denigrated in the name of cultural tourism. I thus evoke young researchers and budding anthropologists to rise to the occasion and pursue research to document 'subjective truth of the communities' and come forward to protect any further violation of their fundamental rights.

[1] It was officially banned in 1960 by the Indian Government, but it lasted till 1970s, when the community decided to abandon it as a cultural practice, though remnants and pride accompanying it is distinctively visible in the community.

[2] In a recent article Konyak & Zhim (2022) examine lived experiences of tattooed Konyak men and women using a feminist phenomenological gaze to analyse gendered bodies and gendered lives (J. Indian Anthropol. Soc. 57(1): 61-77(2022).

Avvai Nombu: The Silent Strength of Women's Rituals



By Rithitha M.S.L.

Introduction:

In the southern districts of Tamil Nadu, especially during the months of *Thai* (January-February), *Maasi* (February-March) and *Aadi* (July-August), a unique and deeply symbolic tradition is observed by women - *Avvai Nombu*, also known as *Sevvai Pillayar Nombu*. This sacred observance takes place on Tuesdays of the chosen month, either during the first or third week, depending on family or regional customs. Though little known to the outside world, this *vratham* (vow or fast) is a profound celebration of womanhood, fertility, and collective strength passed down quietly through generations.

Women's Celebration of Avvai Nombu

The morning of *Avvai Nombu* begins with prayers and elaborate rituals. Women draw intricate *kolam* using flowers and place an idol of *Pillayar* (*Ganesha*) made from cow dung and turmeric at the centre. *Punga* (*Pongamia pinnata*) and tamarind leaves are spread, along with a *kalasam*-a sacred metal pot filled with water, topped with a turmeric-smeared coconut and adorned with flowers symbolizing prosperity and homage to the revered Tamil *Sangam* poetess *Avvaiyar*. *Avvaiyar* is not only celebrated for her literary genius but also revered as a spiritual guide and embodiment of wisdom and compassion.

As dusk falls, preparations begin for the central ritual-dumpling-making (made out of rice flour), which starts past 10 p.m. exclusively among women of all age groups. The gathering usually takes place at the home of an elderly woman. Materials are brought collectively, and as the night unfolds, the women sing, share stories and shape dumplings (*kozhukattai*) in various forms like lamps, coconuts, flower baskets, mortar and pestle, *paniyaram* pans, ceremonial torches, leaves, logs, pots and small cups. Importantly, all items are crafted in odd numbers.

The first dumpling is always lamp-shaped (as lamps are associated with auspicious beginnings), marking the start of this sacred culinary offering. These dumplings are not salted and are never shared with men who are strictly forbidden from witnessing the ritual or consuming the offerings. This reinforces the exclusivity and power of feminine energy in this space. A special belief surrounds the lamp-shaped dumpling: if a coconut ball is found inside, it predicts the birth of a boy; if a leaf is inside, it predicts the birth of a girl.

From Ashes to Abundance: The Story Behind the Ritual:

The spiritual intensity of the night finds its roots in the poignant origin story of the ritual. It is said that *Avvaiyar* once visited a young girl's home seeking alms. The girl, overwhelmed, shared her hardship of how her father and

seven elder brothers worked as daily-wage labourers struggling to feed the family. Moved by her plight, *Avvaiyar* gave the girl the only grain and coconut she had and instructed her to follow a special *vratham* to bring prosperity to her family. Lacking even firewood, the determined girl climbed up with one foot on a *punga* tree and the other on a tamarind tree to look around for fire. She saw light coming from a cremation ground, approached it and respectfully collected the logs to cook her dumplings. She shaped them after everything she encountered: the lamp, the coconut, leaves, logs, utensils, even the pyre and ceremonial torch. Miraculously, after this act of faith and creativity, her family's fortunes improved, and she eventually married. Before leaving, she passed the ritual to her sister-in-law, instructing her to follow it properly. However, when her advice was ignored, poverty returned until the sister-in-law resumed the ritual with devotion, restoring prosperity once more. Over time, this evolved into a sacred feminine observance.

Conclusion

But today, this deeply gendered and empowering ritual is disappearing. Urban migration, nuclear family structures and modern lifestyles have distanced women from such collective experiences. *Avvai Nombu* is a living testament to the creative power of women, their resilience in the face of hardship and their ability to craft meaning, memory and hope.

Reference:

Devika, V. (2018, June 28). What Avvai meant to women. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/theatre/what-avvai-meant-to-women/article24278971.ece>



The Values of Ganesh Festival



by Dr. Lingaraj Niduvani.

Introduction:

India is known as the land of festivals. Each festival carries its own unique spiritual, cultural, and social significance. Festivals are not only occasions of joy but also transmit moral values, unity, and a sense of social responsibility. Among these, the *Ganesh Festival (Ganesh Chaturthi)* holds a very special place. Lord *Ganesha*, worshipped as “*Vighneshwara*” (the remover of obstacles), “*Siddhivinayaka*” (the bestower of success), and the god of wisdom and intellect, is revered by millions. Traditionally, no auspicious work begins without invoking his blessings.

The *Ganesh Festival*, celebrated across India particularly in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Goa, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and parts of North India is not merely a religious ritual. It is a festival that teaches values of knowledge, unity, environmental awareness, service, discipline, cultural preservation, and social equality. It is both a spiritual celebration and a social movement.

Historical Background: While Ganesh Chaturthi has been observed for centuries in homes and temples, the idea of celebrating it as a Public Festival was pioneered by freedom fighter Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak in the late 19th century. Under British colonial rule, Tilak transformed the private household worship into a community festival to bring people together, strengthen social bonds, and instill a spirit of nationalism. Today, this legacy continues, as *Ganesh Festival* remains a symbol of unity and collective participation.

Core Values of Ganesh Festival:

- **Knowledge and Wisdom:** Lord *Ganesha* is considered the deity of learning and intellect. Students, teachers, researchers, and entrepreneurs pray to him for success in their endeavors. The festival emphasizes the importance of education, rational thinking, patience, and wisdom. It reminds us that true progress comes not only from rituals but also from learning and the pursuit of knowledge.
- **Unity and Social Harmony:** One of the most remarkable aspects of *Ganesh Festival* is its ability to unite people. Regardless of caste, creed, religion, or economic status, people come together to celebrate. Public installations of idols, collective prayers, and cultural activities promote cooperation, togetherness, and harmony. It reinforces the value of living as one community.
- **Environmental Awareness:** In recent years, the environmental impact of the festival has become a matter of concern. Traditionally, idols made of Plaster of Paris and chemical paints cause water pollution and ecological damage. However, the growing practice of using Eco-Friendly Clay Idols, Natural Colors, and And Biodegradable Decorations has shifted the focus toward sustainability. The festival now serves as a reminder of our responsibility to protect nature and live in balance with the environment.
- **Discipline and Responsibility:** *Ganesh Festival* is celebrated with great devotion and orderliness. Rituals are performed at fixed times, community members take on responsibilities, and events are organized with careful planning. This cultivates values of discipline, punctuality, accountability, and collective responsibility, which are essential in both personal and public life.
- **Spirit of Service:** The festival is also an opportunity for social service. Various organizations and youth groups engage in activities such as Food Distribution, Blood Donation Camps, Educational Aid, Awareness Drives, and Community Services. These activities highlight the value of service, compassion, and giving back to society.
- **Cultural Enrichment:** *Ganesh Festival* is not just about worship but also about celebrating India's rich cultural heritage. During the celebrations, one finds music, dance, theatre, poetry recitals, folk art, and storytelling. These cultural expressions keep traditions alive while inspiring creativity among the youth. The festival thus becomes a platform to pass on cultural values from one generation to the next.
- **Devotion and Moral Values:** At its core, the festival is an expression of devotion. Through prayers, hymns, and rituals, devotees learn humility, patience, and surrender to divine will. Lord *Ganesha* symbolizes moral virtues such as truth, courage, faith, and righteousness. Worship during this festival is not just about seeking blessings but also about cultivating inner strength and ethical values.

- **Equality and Social Justice:** *Ganesh* Festival is also a symbol of equality. Public celebrations are open to everyone, where distinctions of wealth, caste, and social background disappear. Standing before Lord *Ganesh*, everyone's the same. This reinforces the principles of Social Justice, Equality, And Fraternity, which are cornerstones of Indian society.
- **Economic Value:** The festival also plays an important role in boosting the local economy. Idol makers, artisans, flower vendors, decorators, cultural performers, and small businesses all find livelihood opportunities during this time. It stimulates local trade and provides employment, reflecting the festival's role in sustaining community economies.
- **Leadership and Collective Organization:** Organizing a community *Ganesh* festival requires planning, teamwork, and leadership. Youth groups, neighborhood associations, and cultural committees come together to manage finances, logistics, programs, and social service activities. This experience strengthens organizational skills, leadership qualities, and a sense of responsibility among participants.
- **Health and Energy:** The festival fills communities with energy and enthusiasm. The processions, cultural performances, sports, and devotional singing promote physical activity, mental well-being, and emotional connection. It instills positivity, vigor, and a spirit of celebration, reminding us that festivals are also about holistic health and happiness.

Conclusion:

Ganesh Festival is much more than a religious observance; it is a celebration of values that are deeply relevant to modern society. It teaches us knowledge, unity, environmental responsibility, service, discipline, cultural pride, equality, and social justice. It provides livelihood opportunities, nurtures leadership, and fosters community harmony. As we celebrate Lord *Ganesh*, we are reminded that the true spirit of the festival lies not only in rituals but also in Living These Values in Our Daily Lives. If each of us adopts the principles of wisdom, compassion, cooperation, and responsibility, the festival of Ganesha will become a guiding light for a better society and a stronger nation.



The Toda Embroidery



By Dr. Sapna Tiwari.

Introduction

Toda embroidery is an ancient and beautiful skill that originates from the Toda people of the Nilgiri Hills in southern India. Toda women embroidered shawls called *poothkuli* in their local language. It holds significant cultural importance, with its unique motifs and designs reflecting the community's close connections to nature, religion, and its mythological traditions. It also signifies the community's identity, spirituality, and bond with the natural world. This tradition provides valuable insights into the history, beliefs, and way of life of the Toda community. Toda women primarily practised it; now some men from the community are also learning and practising it.



Figure: A Woman showing *poothkuli* (shawl)

The embroidery consists of numerous patterns that are integral to the community's social, cultural, and religious life. The *poothkuli* (shawl) is worn during festivals, weddings, and other special occasions, serving as a symbol of the community's identity, continuity, and reverence for the gods. Through this form of art, the Toda people transmit stories, beliefs and cultural values to succeeding generations.



Figure: Toda women wearing *poothkuli* on different occasions

Patterns, Technique and Materials:

The patterns used in Toda embroidery often symbolize deeper meanings. The geometric shapes used in embroidery, such as diamonds, spirals, and zigzags, are commonly employed to represent elements of the Toda's environment, including mountains, rivers, the sky, and celestial bodies. These designs also hold spiritual significance, with certain patterns being associated with rituals such as marriage and religious ceremonies. Toda embroidery is traditionally handmade using cotton and wool threads. In the past, Toda women mainly used cotton threads, but today they prefer wool for their embroidery. What sets it apart from other Indian embroidery styles is its use of long, distinct stitches that create a raised effect on the fabric. This technique makes the designs look vibrant and stand out, adding depth and texture to the embroidery. The geometric motifs are not merely decorative; they carry deeper meanings, reflecting the community's connection to its environment, deities, and beliefs. The materials in Toda embroidery reflect the community's focus on sustainability, as fabrics are handwoven by the Toda people, usually from cotton. Using natural and handwoven materials to make items highlights the Toda community's rich cultural heritage and traditions. The embroidery reflects centuries of knowledge about local flora, dyes, and textiles that have been passed down through generations.



Figure: Toda woman doing embroidery

Social and Economic Significance of Toda Embroidery:

Apart from its cultural significance, Toda embroidery plays a vital role in the lives of the artisans, particularly women. For generations, Toda women have relied on this craft as their primary source of income, producing embroidered textiles that are sold or exchanged at local markets. This work has provided them with a sense of financial independence and empowerment, enabling them to support their families.

Despite the cultural significance of Toda embroidery, the economic benefits for artisans remain minimal, hampered by various obstacles. The popularity of mass-produced textiles and machine-made products has led to a decline in demand for handcrafted, embroidered items. Many artisans struggle to access fair markets where they can sell their work at prices that truly reflect their skill and effort. Additionally, economic shifts are affecting the craft; young people are increasingly leaving their villages in pursuit of better opportunities, resulting in a decline in the transfer of traditional skills, such as Toda embroidery. This younger generation tends to favour modern careers, leaving behind a craft that has been integral to their cultural identity for centuries. Moreover, as global interest in handicrafts grows, raw material costs have risen, making it harder for artisans to afford necessary materials. Along with limited economic growth opportunities in rural regions, these factors put significant pressure on artisans, leading to the commercialisation and potential exploitation of their crafts.



Figure: A Toda woman showing the design of the poothkuli

The Decline of Traditional Practices and Revival Efforts:

Toda embroidery has also suffered, like many others, from industrialization and globalization. The rise of machine-made textiles has reduced demand for costly, labour-intensive hand embroidery. The declining interest of the younger generation further threatens its survival. However, efforts to preserve the craft are underway, with organisations organising workshops, exhibitions, and collaborations with designers worldwide to raise awareness and highlight its cultural value. Modern partnerships in fashion and decor can help integrate Toda embroidery into contemporary trends, increasing visibility and providing artisans with new economic opportunities.

Recommendation for Preserving Toda Embroidery:

- To preserve the vitality of Toda embroidery, various strategies should be implemented.
- Artisans must be paid fair wages for their work. Expanding access to better markets, both locally and globally, will help support their livelihoods.
- Creating direct connections between Toda artisans and consumers, eliminating middlemen, enables artisans to retain a larger portion of their earnings.
- Education is crucial for preserving this tradition; including Toda embroidery in local school curricula in the Nilgiri region can teach youth the craft and foster pride in their heritage. Passing down these skills will help secure the craft's future.
- Forming additional cooperatives or self-help groups (SHGs) is vital, as it empowers artisans and gives them a collective voice.
- Additionally, collaborating with modern designers and the fashion industry can help adapt the craft to contemporary clothing and décor while preserving its traditional character. These collaborations can introduce Toda embroidery to a global audience, preserve it as a cultural treasure, and provide artisans with a sustainable livelihood.



Figure: A toda woman in Poothkuli

The City of Mahadev: Monsoon as Metaphor



by Dr. Shubham Tiwari.

Banaras is a wonderful city, and living in this city is surrounded by various contradictions of life. How is that? So, it is like, this is the city where one wakes up early in the morning and eats paan! At the same time, at the tea stall between the burning pyres at Manikarnika and Harishchandra Ghat, where one is inside burning pyres, and others are discussing on anything; you can hear the old people discussing deep philosophy of humanity to lusting jokes from love affairs, Bhojpuri, Mahadev's bhajans to any sad and happy thing about life.

Therefore, I have tried to keep my experiential exploration objective by referring it to the life of a common Banarasi. Banaras - a city where life and death dance together on the ghats, where the detachment of devotion dissolves in the mundaneness, and where the monsoon or *Sawan* not only comes but also transforms. Being a true Banarasi, my love for this city is not abstract; It is in the scent of betel leaves in the famous paan shops, in the way the Ganges swells with the fury of the monsoon, and in the murmur of Shiva's name echoing through the rain-soaked lanes. Because, in the words of Kashinath ji, "The fun that Banaras has, it is neither in Paris nor in Farash!" *Sawan*, the month of Shravan, is the time when Banaras reveals itself in its true form, in which there is a confluence - a universe of water, faith and unwavering rhythm. The sky, once blue, is now filled with pitch-black clouds that pour down without warning, soaking the labyrinth of lanes and transforming the Ganges into a churning force. The Ganges, the river that is usually sluggish, becomes a rushing current, its waters crashing against the steps of the *Tulsi* temple and swallowing the lower ghats. Yet, this is not destruction; it is renewal! How? That is the secret... 'Guru!' For *Banarasis*, *Sawan* is inseparable from *Shiva*—the *Neelkanth* who drank the poison of existence and turned this month's rain into a salve for the universe. Every Monday, the city becomes a pilgrimage centre. Women in emerald-green saris, glass bangles tinkling on their wrists, men with dreadlocks and a strange devotional faith pervades the *kavadiyas* carrying *kavads*, along with the local *Banarasi*, including men, women, old, youth, all of them, including children clutching tiny brass vessels—all march together to countless temples. The air resounds with devotion, chants of "*Bol-Bam!*" rise above the raindrops. Time fades in *Sawan*. Dawn comes draped in mist, and the sound of conches from the Dashashwamedh Ghat pierces the grey light. The evening *aarti* of Ganga takes on an even deeper resonance, those words - "*Jatavīgalajalpravahpavitsthle, gale'valambaya lambitam bhujangatungamalikām. Damddammaddammadma ninadvaddamarvayam, chakaar chandātandvam tanotu naḥ shivaḥ shivam.*" From the waves of this mantra chanting, Ganges is delightful, along with the chanting of Ganga itself, "*Ganga tarang ramaniya gata kalap, Shubhra jata jut*



vibhushit mastak. Punya salil nirmal pavana dhara, Sharan pade tav charan sukhkari." Suppose, after this hum, now the whole of Banaras returns from the ghats to their homes to wake up again tomorrow! In the month of *Sawan*, at Kashi Vishwanath, the *Shivalinga* glitters beneath the endless streams of Ganga water, while in secret corners like *Kaithi Markandeya Mahadev* or *Bachchav Baba Sultankeshwar*, whispers of age-old prayers echo in the humid air during the entire month of *Sawan*.

This is about the outer facade for which Banaras is famous, but *Sawan* and Banaras are not limited to temples only. It is also in the life scattered in the verandas, neighbours sharing plates of pakoras with karkure and tea under shared umbrellas, the silky fragrance of *Sawan* coming from the saree shops and the mixture of the sharp-tartness of the paan of Keshav Paan Bhandar. It is also in the contradictions - like the loud and shrill sounds of Bhojpuri songs coming from auto-rickshaws, while the burning pyres in Manikarnika are struggling with the rain-soaked wood, along with the sips of tea of foreigners at Assi-Ghat. "How can a dead body be burnt with wet wood," when the *Banarasi* mumbles, it seems as if he is saying that the infinite possibilities of life are still alive in Varanasi at which is sprinkled everywhere, from tea to cigarettes - Doam Raja while practicing cremation is telling all this as giving a sarcastic acceptance to this continuous cycle of life in the city. However, some things are also absent in Banaras this *Sawan*. Like, the familiar taste of Chachi's Kachoris is missing; the craving for Pahalwan Saavani Lassi remains. Everything else is fine! That sarcastic Chacha's point where he shrugs and says- "The floods rise, the drains overflow, yet the Paan shops flourish, their Paan leaves a challenging green against the grey!" Well, Paan rhymes with Banaras here, that retro nights in dimly lit Paan Addas with old Bollywood tunes, Burman's music during rainy days, "Kahin Door Jab Din Dhal Jaye" lend a melancholy to it. And, the eagerness of the tourists alighting at the Cantt station turns that melancholy back into boundless entertainment.

Sawan in Banaras is a dedication to chaos and purity. Ganga is not just a river; she is *Ganga Maa*, her floods are both destructive and purifying. Rain is not just a season; it is *Shiva's* blessing, each drop a thread in the eternal fabric of the city. The cosmic beauty of *Sawan* is incomplete without the *kanwarias*, their barefoot processions flowing like a river of saffron on wet stone. *Banarasis* and tourists alike smear their foreheads with the *Tripund- Tilak*, a symbol of Shiva's blessings, while the fragrance of *Banarasi* paan—especially from Nagwa's Keshav Paan Bhandar—lingers in the humid air of Banaras. To be a *Banarasi* is to flow with the currents of *Sawan*—its tumult, its beauty, its unwavering faith. As *Sawan* wanes, the Ganges remains high, and the air is thick with humidity. The Monday fervour may fade, but the connection remains—between people, between devotee and deity, between the city and its river.

To write about *Sawan* in Banaras is not just an exploratory exploration, but also to capture an atmosphere, a state. It is a universe built on water, devotion, silk, *bhang*, *bhajans*, and an unwavering sense of place. It is chaotic, challenging, beautiful, and deeply sacred.



Prof. Arbind Sinha



Interview by Saba Farhin.

Prof. Arbind Sinha is an eminent academic and communications expert with a distinguished career spanning over four decades. He holds a postgraduate degree in Anthropology and a Ph.D. in Sociology with a specialization in development communications management. Until April 2025, he was associated with the Mudra Institute of Communications Ahmedabad (MICA), where he held senior academic positions, including two tenures as its Head.

Before joining MICA in 2002, he spent twenty-two years with the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) in the scientific cadre, contributing to the science-technology-society interface, interactive tele-teaching, and development and disaster communication. His professional journey also includes roles as Professor at TALEEM Research Foundation, Communication Advisor to the Denmark Embassy, New Delhi, and Director-General of Shanti Business School. For the last two decades, Prof. Sinha has collaborated with national and international organisations to strengthen public health communication systems. He has served on several national and state-level committees and contributed extensively to national development programmes, integrating anthropological insight with strategic communication. An accomplished author, Prof. Sinha has published books, chapters, and research papers, and represented India in academic forums in Sweden, Canada, the US, Thailand, and Singapore.

In this interview, we explore his motivation, contributions, and insights for shaping the future of anthropology in India.

Could you share how your journey in anthropology began and what inspired your move into development communications management?

I come from a very small town. Growing up in Bihar, I witnessed the challenges of development closely, so in some ways, the development word was never completely new to me. To be honest, my entry into anthropology was not by choice. I originally studied Zoology, but I didn't score well enough to secure admission into a Master's program in Zoology. I was determined to pursue higher studies as education was important in my family, with many pursuing professions like medicine and engineering. I felt strongly that I should also continue my academic journey. During that time, I went to Ranchi to explore admission opportunities. There, someone suggested

that if I wanted to pursue a Master's, Anthropology was another option. At first, I thought he was suggesting law, because back then, many who couldn't secure admission elsewhere turned to law. But he clarified that it was a two-year Master's program in Anthropology. Truly, I didn't know



anything about Anthropology then, but since I was eager to pursue a Master's degree, I applied and got admission. So, my entry into Anthropology was more out of compulsion than choice. In the beginning, I wasn't a very serious student. I didn't know much about the subject, nor did I see a clear career path in it. But everything changed in my second year, around end of 1971, when I accompanied my teacher, Professor L. P. Vidyarthi on his 6 weeks Andaman and Nicobar Islands field work. Professor Vidyarthi was the Chair of a task force set up by the Government of India. For an Anthropology student, the idea of traveling to places like the Andaman and Nicobar Islands or Bastar was a dream. Professor Vidyarthi was selecting students, mostly from the first year, to accompany him. I expressed my interest, and though he initially resisted since I was in my second year, I managed to convince him. Eventually, I joined the team along with three first-year students and one PhD scholar. That experience was transformative. We spent weeks in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, conducting intensive fieldwork and traveling across inhabited areas. It was my first real exposure to Anthropology in practice, and it completely reshaped how I saw the discipline and my future in it. From my fieldwork experience in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, my perspective on anthropology began to change. Some students were fascinated by the culture and way of life of tribal communities. For me, what stood out most were the development challenges, both for the tribes themselves and for the administration trying to reach them. That angle drew me deeply into anthropology.

I became more serious about the subject, completed my fieldwork, and eventually finished my Master's. Like any young graduate, my next step was to look for employment and practical experience. Around that time, Professor Vidyarthi had a project funded by ICSSR in Varanasi, centered on his long-standing interest: the

sacred complex. I joined the project and even registered to pursue a PhD on the topic. But honestly, I found it difficult to fully connect with the sacred complex idea. I didn't see much applied value in it. Still, I completed the fieldwork and presented my paper in what I now understand was a dissemination seminar, where researchers share findings with peers in the field. During my presentation, I challenged the existing concept of "sacred specialists." I argued that there should be two categories instead: sacred specialists, who perform rituals, and sacred associates, who support or enable these activities.

Professor Vidyarthi wasn't very pleased with my interpretation, but the session chair, Dr. Binod Agarwal, appreciated my conceptual thinking and supported me. After the seminar, this was November 1973, Dr. Agarwal casually asked if I'd be interested in working with the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). At that time, I had no idea what ISRO was! He explained that ISRO was planning to use satellite communication for rural development, and that anthropologists could play a role. The idea fascinated me. I appeared for the interview, cleared it, and by early 1974, I had joined ISRO. That decision changed the entire course of my career. It was the transition point where anthropology and communication intersected in my life. I decided to drop my PhD registration on the sacred complex as I felt I had found a more meaningful path. At ISRO, I worked on a groundbreaking project. Remember, at that time, television wasn't widely available. In fact, in Calcutta, the only Close Circuit Television set was at the Birla Museum. Cities like Patna, Madras, Lucknow and Jaipur had none. Yet here was a project that used satellites to beam educational and developmental television programs directly into remote rural villages. For the first time, communication technology was being used as a tool for rural development in India, and I was part of it. That project shaped my career. Eventually, I completed my PhD (in 1981) on Rural Development and Mass Media. Over time, I came to wear two hats: one as an anthropologist, and the other as a development communication specialist. My strength has been using anthropological and cultural insights while employing communication as a powerful tool for development.

Looking back, I feel fortunate. Not many people get the chance to bridge two worlds of Anthropology and Communication, and apply them together for meaningful change. For me, anthropology has always remained an inseparable part of my journey, while communication has been the instrument through which I put it into practice.

Looking back at your extensive career, which of your research projects or contributions do you consider most impactful, and why?

Most of my projects were based on the requirements of the organizations I worked with. When you work for an institution, its priorities guide your tasks, and you use anthropological skills to understand situations, design projects, and sometimes even help in their execution. Let me share five key projects.

The first was in 1984, when I was at ISRO but working on a Planning Commission project. Unseasonal rains in Western Uttar Pradesh (UP) had damaged crops, and the

Commission wanted to assess the magnitude of agricultural loss in India from such rains. Our study showed that if farmers had even a few hours' advance warning of unusual cloud formation, they could protect their harvested crops and save at least 5% of total agricultural output. At a national level, this was significant. We presented these findings to the Planning Commission, which passed them on to the Indian Meteorological Department. They invited us to present, and our insights directly contributed to improvements in India's weather warning system.

The second was with the National Remote Sensing Agency (NRSA), now part of ISRO. We worked on Potential Fishing Zone forecasts using satellite data. Satellites could detect algae concentrations that attracted fish, enabling us to predict fishing zones for three to four days. This information was transmitted to the fishermen across coastal areas of India, instead of wandering, fishermen could head directly to these zones, saving time and about 25% in diesel costs. The system was adopted across coastal areas and appreciated by the Departments of Space, Ocean Development, and Information & Broadcasting, which began broadcasting such forecasts.

The third was again with the Meteorological Department. In those days, television only provided weather updates for Delhi, Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta. But this wasn't useful for people traveling elsewhere. Our study showed the need for more localized information. The department, already exploring this, used our inputs to expand forecasts to many major cities and later every state. Around the same time, I worked with ISRO's rural television station in Kheda (Gujarat). I noticed that local programs at 7:30 p.m. clashed with the national news broadcast, drawing audiences away. I recommended shifting it to after 7:30 p.m., which they implemented, improving viewership.

The fourth relates to my role as Communication Advisor for three years with the Denmark Embassy's health sector program, particularly supporting the National Blindness Control Program in Karnataka. Every three months, district officials would present routine PowerPoints in review meetings, but as an anthropologist, I found this superficial. I proposed to the Ambassador that I spend a month in a district to study how information truly reaches people - the "last mile." Approved to travel with my wife, I discovered significant communication gaps: no matter how good a program was, unless people fully understood it, they wouldn't adopt it. This led me to develop the concept of the human channel of communication, now widely taught in health communication courses across. People-to-people (P2P) communication proved more effective than technology alone.

Finally, drawing on my earlier fieldwork in 1975-76 and later the Denmark project, I developed the 'Sociological Model of Development Communication.' This emphasized the need for support systems to help communities use information effectively. The model was adopted in communication policy and is now used by faculty, students, and grassroots health communicators.

How do you envision the role and relevance of anthropology evolving in India over the next decade, especially in the context of technology, communication, and public health?

It's difficult to predict what shape technology will take tomorrow, but looking ahead 10 years, I can say something about its role in anthropology, communication, and especially public health communication. Emerging tools like AI, big data analysis, and GIS mapping, technologies I know a little about through ISRO, are becoming increasingly useful.

They help in data collection, analysis, and generating insights that can influence public discourse and action. But technology cannot replace human intervention. It cannot substitute the trust-based relationships built through immersive ethnography, especially in India, where many marginalized groups have limited digital presence. Technology also cannot capture nonverbal behavior or the subtle everyday interactions essential for understanding culture. In public health, interventions depend heavily on cultural perceptions of illness and medicine, which technology alone cannot address.

Another challenge is misinformation. Health communication relies on two assumptions: that 'proper information' reaches the 'right people', and that they use it 'properly'. Miscommunication can derail entire programs, and this is where anthropologists contribute by working with communication specialists and grassroots health workers to bridge gaps. Communication itself operates in two ways: vertical (top-down) and horizontal (people-to-people). Technology can strengthen vertical communication, like television, mobiles, telemedicine, but horizontal communication remains rooted in human interaction. In India and other developing countries, this horizontal flow is critical, particularly in health. Technology will transform vertical communication, but horizontal communication, largely human-centered, will remain vital. We experimented with telemedicine as early as 1983, linking Safdarjung Hospital, Delhi with another hospital in Ahmedabad. Yet even today, telemedicine remains largely urban. At the grassroots level, where nearly 70 per cent of India's population lives, people often lack access or the ability to use digital tools. This shows why technology alone cannot bridge the gap. So, while technology is indispensable, anthropology ensures that innovation remains ethical, culturally sensitive, and people-centric. That, in my conviction, will not change.

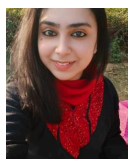
What guidance would you offer to young anthropology scholars aspiring to make meaningful contributions to research and society?

The new generation must have this question on how they can contribute. When I was your age, I was more radical, and I still believe it. Long-term field immersion and direct community engagement should remain central, as cultural subtleties cannot be grasped from a distance. They should be well-grounded in research methodology, rejecting shortcuts that compromise depth and authenticity. Their education should prepare them to address real-world problems across cultural, technological, and environmental contexts. Ultimately, the goal is to produce "ready-to-use"

anthropologists equipped for both scholarship and practice. They must demand a complete and rigorous training that combines theory with practical application.



Contours of Exile: Field Narratives from Jagati, Jammu and Delhi-NCR



By Ashani Dhar.

Field Experiences: Traversing Three Sites of Displacement

A forgotten minority community, with many being further pushed to the margins—this was the first impression that stayed with me from my fieldwork. My research centers on the differential impact of protracted displacement on one of the most wronged communities of India: the Kashmiri Pandits. Forced into exile in their own country more than thirty years ago, the community continues to grapple with questions of justice, belonging, and the elusive dream of return. The exodus from Kashmir, triggered by fear and targeted violence, forced thousands to seek shelter elsewhere. For some, Jammu became a permanent home; for others, it was a temporary stop before they moved onward to Delhi and other cities across India.

Despite being uprooted due to the same historical event, the trajectories of the displaced have diverged significantly. Over three decades later, the quality of life of displaced Kashmiri Pandits is not uniform but layered with differences shaped by class, opportunity, and access to resources. My study explores these differential outcomes, with a particular focus on women's health and well-being. The most reliable way to know about the lived experiences of the displaced Kashmiri Pandits was from them, and therefore, fieldwork formed the backbone of this qualitative inquiry, helping me trace the everyday struggles, the coping mechanisms, and the subtle hierarchies that displacement has produced within the community.

This was a multi-sited study, comparing three distinct locations: Jammu city, Jagati township, and Delhi-NCR. Each site offered unique insights into the lived realities of displacement, highlighting how material conditions, access to healthcare, education, employment, and social networks shaped life differently across contexts.

Entering the Field: Negotiating Access and Trust

Because the subject was deeply personal and traumatic, entering the field was not straightforward. Even though I had a distinct advantage of being a researcher from the community being studied, I was also different in terms of my diction, my context, and that alone made them sceptical of my presence, making me an 'outsider' despite being a Kashmiri Pandit myself. Trust, therefore, could not be assumed—it had to be earned. I relied on key informants, some of whom acted as cultural brokers, vouching for me and softening the scepticism that researchers often encounter. Even then, there were moments of hesitation. Some women would begin narrating their stories, only to fall silent midway, overwhelmed by memories.

Others would stop mid-sentence, regretting that they probably overshared. I learned to respect these silences, to sit with them without rushing to fill the gaps. As a researcher, I was reminded that listening is as much about presence as it is about gathering data.

My positionality was never far from my mind. I was an "insider-outsider"—not displaced myself, yet carrying my own awareness of what exile means for Kashmiris. This duality shaped both access and interpretation. At times, respondents treated me as an empathetic listener; at other times, my outsider status allowed them to narrate with a certain distance, unburdened by the fear of being judged by someone too close to their community. Or the compulsion to sound grateful to the community for helping them in their times of distress.



Figure: Erstwhile relief camps where displaced Kashmiri Pandits lived for years in Jammu. Right next to the tents is an open drain which becomes a breeding ground for mosquitoes during rains.

Jagati Township: Confinement and Camaraderie

Jagati was my first field site and perhaps the most emotionally overwhelming. Walking through the township, the rows of one-room tenements struck me as both orderly and suffocating. Families compressed into these spaces lived lives that were stable yet profoundly limited. The pucca walls stood in sharp contrast to the memories they carried of tarpaulin tents, harsh winters and the cruel summers in the early years of displacement. Women often told me how grateful they were for these permanent structures—yet the gratitude was laced with resignation. They were glad that they didn't have to physically hold onto two sides of the tent while it poured outside in a thunderstorm, but they weren't too happy to live in a town that almost looked like a ghost town in the afternoon, with nothing but buildings slowly turning yellow.

Here, I was quickly made aware of the double-edged nature of collective living. The geographical concentration of displaced Pandits created a strong sense of solidarity—stories were shared, rituals observed together, and friendships sustained survival. Marriage of girls in Jagati is almost a community affair. The marriage happens in the community hall, with the rituals and the catering being

sustained by neighbours who contribute in different ways. Some bring oil, others bring lentils, and yet others offer services like stitching or painting the walls of the home. Yet this very concentration also marked residents with a stigma. “If someone says they are from Jagati,” one respondent told me, “it is like saying you could not rise above your fate. It was reflected in rather interesting ways. Matrimonial alliances are next to impossible between those in Jagati and other Kashmiris.” This ‘othering’, despite a shared history of targeted violence, seems to have far fetched impact in terms of social cohesion and interaction.

Conducting interviews here was both easier and harder than at the other two sites. Easier because people were used to narrating their stories in collective settings; harder because the very density of trauma meant emotions often ran high. I recall one woman showing me the open drains outside her tenement as proof of the township’s neglect. The anger in her voice was not just about sanitation—it was about dignity, or the lack of it. Other women broke down, recalling how difficult her life has been post-displacement because she and her two children were abandoned by her husband after displacement. But conversations were also about how women have shown unparalleled strength and resilience. Whether it is learning how to do *kashida* embroidery and sell it in different places to different vendors in Jammu, or taking up odd-jobs to sustain their families after their husbands fell prey to alcoholism. Their narratives didn’t paint them as passive victims of a historical wrong, but as active survivors who have carried out the role of a provider, material, financial, as well as emotional, all equally well.



Figure: Jagati township; Kashida embroidery being done by Kashmiri Pandit women living in Jagati; Open drains in Jagati with dirty water; Abandoned ‘relief camp’ tents

Jammu City: Diversity and Uneven Survival

In Jammu, the fieldwork unfolded differently. Here, the displaced were dispersed, living across neighbourhoods rather than in concentrated camps. My sample was shaped through snowballing, each conversation opening doors to another household. Unlike Jagati, Jammu revealed a striking diversity of outcomes. Some families had managed to reconstruct a life of relative comfort, building homes that mirrored their old ones in Kashmir. Others lived precariously, still dependent on government relief as their only reliable income. And there were a few who lamented having to leave their home in Kashmir, but didn’t suffer materially as they were better placed economically and had enough of a buffer to start afresh in Jammu.

What I noticed most here was the quiet resilience of women. Many had become the backbone of their families’ survival strategies—taking up teaching, tutoring, or home-based work while also maintaining cultural practices. Yet beneath their resilience was fatigue. One respondent told me, “We tried to recreate Kashmir in our homes. The courtyard, the kitchen, even the way we pray. But this house is still not home.” As I listened, I felt the weight of exile as a daily negotiation between memory and adaptation. Each home that I visited had remnants of Kashmir and its traditions. Most homes in Jammu still go to the local baker called a ‘kandur’ to get their bread and have that with ‘noon chai’ (a pink salted tea) every day at 4 pm. A few of these participants were also those who had lived in camps for a few years before being able to shift out. And there were yet others who lived in some deplorable conditions in Jammu, like in a garage or a tiny one-room apartment with a common toilet, just to avoid living in a ‘relief camp’ so that they could escape the stigma associated with it.

Fieldwork in Jammu made me reflect on my own position as a researcher. Moving from one household to another, I often wondered how my presence disrupted their daily rhythm. I had to remind myself to be more than just a collector of narratives—to be a respectful listener who recognised that each disclosure came at an emotional cost.

Delhi: Integration and Internal Hierarchies

Delhi presented yet another picture. Here, Kashmiri Pandits were relatively well integrated. Many held government jobs, worked in the private sector, or had retired into financial security or some kind. In contrast to Jagati or Jammu, Delhi offered invisibility—exile did not define one’s identity in the same way. In a city of migrants, Pandits blended in, though clusters of them still existed in certain neighbourhoods.

Yet beneath this surface integration lay internal hierarchies within the community. During interviews, several references were made to Jagati as a marker of lower social standing. In matrimonial discussions, particularly, families would weigh whether a potential match hailed from Jagati or from better-off circles in Delhi or Jammu. It was jarring to realise how displacement itself had stratified the community, producing new inequalities within an already marginalised group.

Women in Delhi often spoke of opportunity rather than trauma. They discussed their children’s education, career choices, and upward mobility. This was not because they did not face any trials or tribulations post-displacement. Many stayed in cramped rooms with their relatives, an experience that was more difficult for women than men, but their progression has been faster, thereby making their displacement somewhat less traumatic than that in Jagati. Yet memory remained alive in subtle ways—through the food they cooked, the festivals they celebrated, and the artefacts they displayed in their homes. In nearly every Delhi household I visited, I found a token of Kashmir: a photograph of Kheer Bhawani temple,

a miniature shikara, or embroidered shawls. These objects quietly testified to a homeland carried in exile. It was interesting to hear how Kashmiri Pandits in Delhi were one of the most vocal groups fighting for the relocation of displaced Kashmiri Pandits, even though they themselves were in better-off places.

For me, as a researcher, Delhi also demanded a different posture. Here, participants were more conscious of how they presented their stories, often emphasising success and resilience. I found myself questioning: were they narrating their lives as they lived them, or as they wished them to be seen? This reflexive discomfort became part of my field notes, reminding me that data is not just about what is said, but also about silences, self-censorship, and aspirations. This was probably because the focus of narratives in Delhi was about the challenges faced with respect to education, employment and improving visibility instead of just the challenges faced.



Figure: Pictures taken by the husband of one respondent to show the unsanitary conditions of the relief camp before shifting to Jagati



Figure: An ongoing FGD in Jammu. Picture has been blurred to maintain privacy of participants



Figure: Women gathered for a celebration in Delhi-NCR in a Kashmiri Pandit colony, playing a 'tumbakhnar' a traditional Kashmiri instrument. Faces have been blurred to maintain privacy of the participants.

Reflections on Researcher-Self

Moving between the three sites, I became acutely aware that fieldwork is as much about the researcher as it is about the researched. I carried my own assumptions and had to confront them repeatedly. In Jagati, I caught myself romanticizing solidarity until I saw how it was also a form of enforced confinement. How those in Jagati collectively narrated a much more difficult past than others in Jammu or Delhi, but also how women in Jagati felt doubly marginalised as against the men in Jagati. In Jammu, I tended to celebrate resilience until fatigue and despair surfaced in conversations. In Delhi, I almost didn't believe the sense of security and self-assuredness I saw, only to realize it came with its own burden of internal community hierarchies.

There were also emotional costs. At times, I felt like an intruder reopening wounds and causing agony to older participants. At other times, I felt complicit in the silences—accepting when someone chose not to narrate further. Yet, these ethical dilemmas also deepened my understanding of displacement as a living, breathing reality that cannot be neatly categorized.

One of the most interesting features of the research across the three sites was the degree of freedom that women in each site seemed to have. Jagati, allowed women to gather in one place and talk about their trials and tribulations, free from the prying eyes of men. This shared sense of freedom and privacy allowed them to divulge some of the most intimate experiences they had, even if that meant talking ill of their own family members and how they felt utterly neglected. In Jammu and Delhi-NCR, since the interviews all happened in the homes of the women, complete privacy was difficult. Many time, the men of the house would either hover around, or intervene in the interview. As a result, women would not get the space to voice their opinions or share their experiences openly. The only time they could talk freely was when they would get together for the evening 'aarti' or some other ritual.

Conclusion

The field experience underscored that displacement is not only about movement across space but also about negotiation with new structures of opportunity and exclusion. For Kashmiri Pandits, exile has produced not one but multiple realities: isolation and stigma in Jagati, uneven survival in Jammu, and relative integration in Delhi. At the heart of these divergent trajectories lies a common thread—the desire to keep Kashmir alive, whether through memories, rituals, or community ties.

For me as a researcher, the journey was transformative. Fieldwork became not just a method of data collection, but a mirror reflecting my own assumptions, positionality, and ethical responsibilities. I left each site carrying not only transcripts and notes, but also the imprint of conversations, silences, and the resilience of women whose stories forms the heart of this study.

Barefoot in the Monsoon: A Photo Essay from Jharkhand's Tribal Uplands



By Kulesh Bhandari.

In the tribal uplands of Dumka, as the first clouds roll across the Sal-canopied sky, life bends once again to the rhythm of soil and water. There are no machines here, no uniform rows or corporate chemicals. This is farming that listens. To birdsongs, to bullocks, to the rain itself.

Every monsoon, the Santhal farmers begin again — barefoot, unhurried, intimate with the land. Rice saplings are pulled from nurseries by hand, roots wrapped in coconut fibre, and women walk single file across bunds, heads low, voices soft. Their work, though backbreaking, is meditative — a ritual passed through generations, rooted in the very mud beneath their feet.

This photo essay, captured through July 2025, documents the living textures of that tradition. From the first plough to the final planting, from scarecrow flags to returning cattle, these images offer fragments of a quiet heritage — where farming is not production, but participation. A relationship between forest, family, and field.

These are not the stories of struggle we so often assign to the rural poor. These are stories of knowledge, timing, rhythm, and resistance. In an age of vanishing diversity and agro-industrial haste, Jharkhand's tribal farmlands still speak the old tongue: of dignity, soil care, and ecological memory.

Photographs & Captions:

Young rice saplings stand bundled like green torches, reflecting in shallow monsoon water.



Figure: Shikaripara Block, Dumka District – July 2025

Tightly packed seedling bundles rest along a raised bund, ready to be transplanted by hand.



Figure: Shikaripara Block, Dumka District – July 2025

A farmer guides his bullocks across a newly ploughed patch, feet sunk in ancestral mud.



Figure: Ramgarh Block, Dumka District – July 2025

Women farmers, brightly dressed, work in tandem to transplant rice in a communal paddy.



Figure: Ramgarh Block, Dumka District – July 2025

Ploughing under palms: A moment of rural harmony between man, cattle, and monsoon land.



Figure: Ramgarh Block, Dumka District – July 2025

Circling again with calm resolve, the bullocks continue the age-old choreography of tilling.



Figure: Ramgarh Block, Dumka District – July 2025

A *desi* nursery plot, marked with fluttering scarecrow flags, sways against a moody sky.



Figure: Shikaripara Block, Dumka District – July 2025

Evening returns: tribal cattle herders walk barefoot on a jungle road, their herd marking the rhythm of retreat.



Figure: Kathi Kund Forest Road, Dumka District – July 2025

All photographs were captured by the author during fieldwork in July 2025. Usage permitted for publication in Anthro Bulletin, August 2025 edition.

Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought



Book reviewed by Dhuri Saxena.

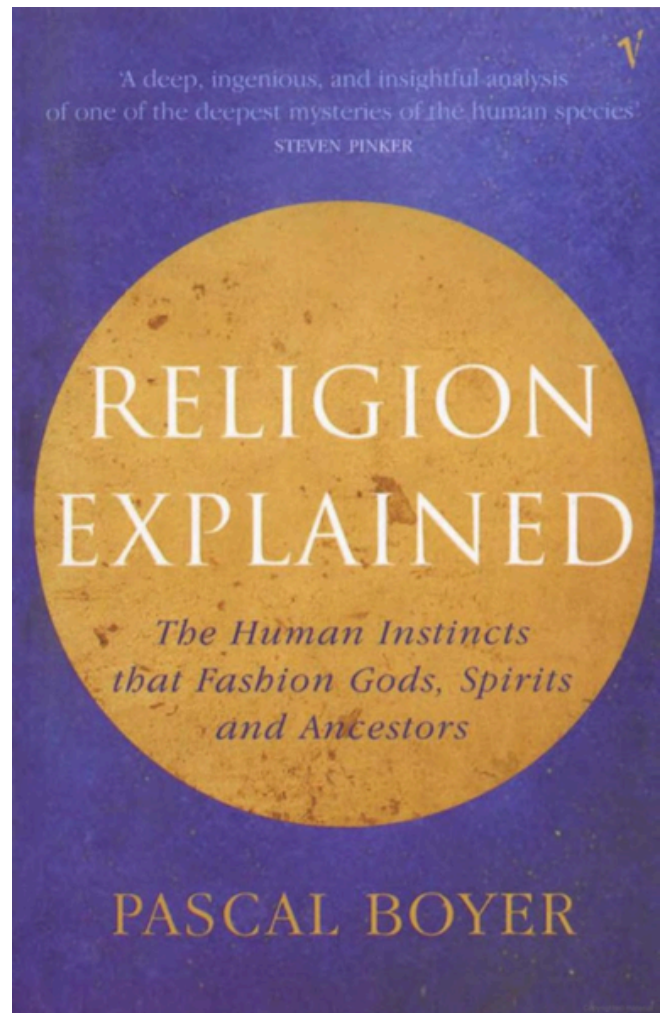
Imagine starting with a book that explores the workings of the human mind rather than delving straight into theology or doctrine. That is precisely what “Religion Explained” (2001) does, and it is the reason the introduction is so incredibly captivating. Before relating these to the origins of religion, Pascal Boyer captivates the reader by first examining the structure of thought, reasoning, and imagination. What most impressed me was how he uses vivid examples of rituals and practices that believers around the world follow to illustrate this point, causing the reader to stop, think, and recognize patterns that are frequently overlooked. The ambitious book “Religion Explained” by Pascal Boyer seeks to transform the study of religion from an enigmatic topic into a tractable scientific issue.

Pascal Boyer’s “Religion Explained” is an ambitious book that aims to move the study of religion from a mysterious subject to a manageable scientific problem. Using insights from cognitive psychology and evolutionary biology, Boyer argues that religion is not a cultural invention but an inevitable product of our evolved mental architecture. He systematically dismantles popular theories that religion is for comfort, social cohesion, or simply explaining the world demonstrating how these are often rationalizations rather than fundamental drivers of belief.

Boyer’s central thesis rests on the concept of “aggregate relevance.” Religious ideas are successful because they are uniquely adept at engaging a variety of our mind’s specialized “explanatory engines.” The book shows that our brains are naturally primed to create and accept a “limited catalogue” of supernatural concepts that are memorable precisely because they are slightly counterintuitive. For instance, an invisible, all-seeing agent is a concept that is easy for our minds to grasp because it activates our innate capacity for social and moral reasoning.

The book excels in its interdisciplinary approach, drawing on extensive ethnographic examples from diverse cultures and weaving in insights from psychology and evolutionary biology. Boyer’s writing style is accessible and engaging, using clever analogies to explain complex ideas. He effectively challenges readers to think beyond simplistic explanations and consider the “invisible hand” of cultural selection, which favors ideas that resonate most effectively with our innate cognitive architecture. Think beyond simplistic explanations and consider the “invisible hand” of cultural selection, which favors ideas that resonate most effectively with our innate cognitive architecture.

The strength of the book lies in its compelling evidence and accessible style. Boyer’s use of global ethnographic examples



from the Fang people of Cameroon to Tibetan monks gives the work a universal feel, while his use of analogies makes complex cognitive theories easy to understand. He provides a cohesive and well-structured argument that builds from rejecting simplistic explanations to providing a sophisticated, multi-layered cognitive framework for religious thought.

While “Religion Explained” is a monumental achievement in its field, it is not without limitations. Its focus on the “why” and “how” of belief transmission can feel cold and detached from the deeply personal and transformative experiences of faith. For a reader looking for a subjective, spiritual perspective, this book may fall short. However, for anyone curious about the scientific underpinnings of religious belief, this is a must-read. It offers a groundbreaking perspective that fundamentally reorients the conversation about one of humanity’s most enduring phenomena.

A Note in Reflection on Vasundhra Sharma's Barefoot Devotion and Bells of Faith: Field Reflections on the Kanwar Yatra



By R. Harini.

Vasundhra Sharma's "Barefoot Devotion and Bells of Faith: Field Reflections on the Kanwar Yatra" in the July 2025 *Anthro Bulletin* examines the annual pilgrimage dedicated to Lord Shiva as a devotional, performative and state-society codified ritual, operationalized through extensive fieldwork among the *Kanwariyas*, volunteers and organizers that constitute India's largest annual religious gathering. By situating the *Yatra* as a liminal realm where normatively structured identities are "*temporarily suspended and redefined*" in the pursuit of the acquisition of the garb of a *Kanwariya*, Vasundhra's article becomes an ingenious exploration of how iconography, language and infrastructure contribute to the construction of a collective consciousness; eloquently documenting how the modernized augmentation of the pilgrimage cultivates new forms of performative religiosity.

Beyond being a conceptually-rich and analytically creative submission, the article prompts me to revisit my own theorization of the *Kanwar Yatra* as a representation of religious revivalism; a concept explored as part of my curriculum. Here, I refer to Berger's '*de-secularization thesis*' as attested in '*The Sacred Canopy*'; religious revivalism establishes, validates and secures identities that are prone to gradual or rapid change due to factors such as globalization, migration and diffusion. This process is also mediated by what Berger terms as the "*heretical imperative*", where the choices that people could access with reference to belief systems and performances of faith expand with increasing pluralism. With reference to the *Kanwar Yatra*, the unprecedented popularity of the pilgrimage after the 1990s could be attributed to both neoliberal transformations after the LPG reformation as well as the collective impact of parallel political emergences, which led to the adoption of new forms of religiosity in response to the impacts of modernism and the call for "*de-secularization*". The popularity of the *Yatra* is also tied to the proliferation of cheaply accessible religious media and music, constituting what can be termed as "*pop-religiosity*" that coincided with demographic upheavals amongst the pilgrims; a significant percentage of the devotees are working class young men from lower-income households from the states of Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, and Rajasthan who are employed in informal economies and as noted by Guru Prakash, are from SC, ST, OBC and Dalit communities. This composition and the very structure of the pilgrimage is rooted in how uniquely participative the *Kanwar Yatra* is. It is perhaps one of the few large scale religious processions where every devotee is able to gain a personalized, sacred intimacy to the lord that they worship; all devotees can pour water over all *lingas*, regardless of their class, caste or creed.

The *Kanwar Yatra* is thus, inherently responsive to the needs of the devotees. It is a simplistic ritual and its approachability proliferates through multiple forms of mass media. But secondly, it also has developed in some ways distinct from institutionalized religion. Fewer ritualistic norms exist and meaning is constructed by allowing the subaltern to integrate. The deity's identity also concretizes this sentiment. Lord *Shiva* is the lord of the sub-altern, the outsiders, the *Vedabhaya* (One who has no share in *vedic* sacrificial offerings). He is '*bhola*' and thus, Vikash Singh opines that the devotees are able to identify with him, personify him and project onto him (they also call each other *Bhole*). However, as observable from the increasing examples of discriminatory mobilization, religious violence and public hooliganism naturalized within the *Yatra* across the years, the pilgrimage has become a site for hierarchical performative dogmatism. Vasundhra's exploration of the *Yatra's* suspension of social hierarchies through the impersonally personal unification of all devotees under the lexical categorizations of "*Bhola*" and "*Bholi*" also acknowledges the contradictions of sectarian exclusion embedded with the politicization of the ritual. The grass root proliferation of religious messaging through media and music serves dual outcomes: associations of hypernationalism and political legitimization.

To conclude, the *Kanwar Yatra* perhaps quintessentially represents Berger's view of religiosity as a tool for legitimizing identity and reaffirming collective consciousness. For the socio-economically disadvantaged and marginalized devotees of the *Kanwar Yatra*, their participation and performance is a 'moral protest in contemporary India', as Vikash Singh notes. However, this "moral protest" is now suspended within structural and institutional performances of dogmatic nationalism and majoritarian instrumentalization as one can also examine the growth of the *Yatra* in association with Neo-Hindutva solidarity and the *Ram Janbhoomi* Movement.

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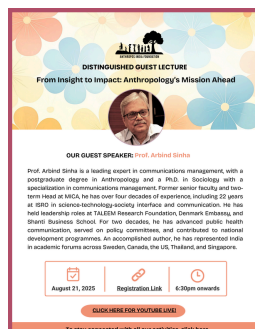
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