

# 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](mailto:aif.newsletter2025@gmail.com).

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### ABOUT THE COVER PHOTO:

This photograph was taken during a recent visit to Nashik. Staying at a farm stay lovingly created and nurtured by women where every corner radiated warmth, from the antique décor to the quiet details that carried stories of care, resilience, and lived experience. The place felt alive with a gentle energy, grounded yet inspiring, where hospitality went beyond comfort and became a shared feeling of belonging.

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## Between Silence and Screens: An Anthropological Pause at the Threshold of 2026

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

As we step into the year 2026, the beginning of a new calendar cycle offers us a rare but powerful opportunity—to pause, reflect, and reboot ourselves. Each year arrives with resolutions and renewed intentions, yet within weeks many of these quietly dissolve into the routines of everyday life. Clarity, we realise with age, does not arrive automatically; it emerges only when we consciously choose to reflect and introspect.

The world today moves at an unprecedented pace. Globalisation, consumerism, and the digital revolution have profoundly reshaped our lives. Social media waves constantly pull us in, blurring the boundaries between presence and distraction. Life has indeed become more complex—perhaps not merely because of external forces, but because we have allowed ourselves to make it so. Stepping out of this whirlpool requires deliberate effort, awareness, and restraint.

Increasingly, we find ourselves drifting away from the real world into the reel world—away from nature, away from silence, and away from the simple joys that once grounded human existence. Meaningful relationships are replaced by virtual connections, and conversations by fleeting interactions. Yet happiness, as anthropology repeatedly reminds us, lies not in abundance but in attentiveness—cherishing small moments, nurturing genuine relationships, and living each experience consciously and fully.

It is in this spirit that we are delighted to present the current issue of *Anthro Bulletin*. Our young scholars bring rich ethnographic engagements—reflections on rituals and festivals, fieldwork experiences, book reviews, and thoughtful responses to earlier issues. Professor K. K. Misra's clarion call to revive linguistic anthropology is particularly timely. The loss of this sub-discipline would mean an irreversible erosion of our ability to understand culture through language, meaning, and expression.

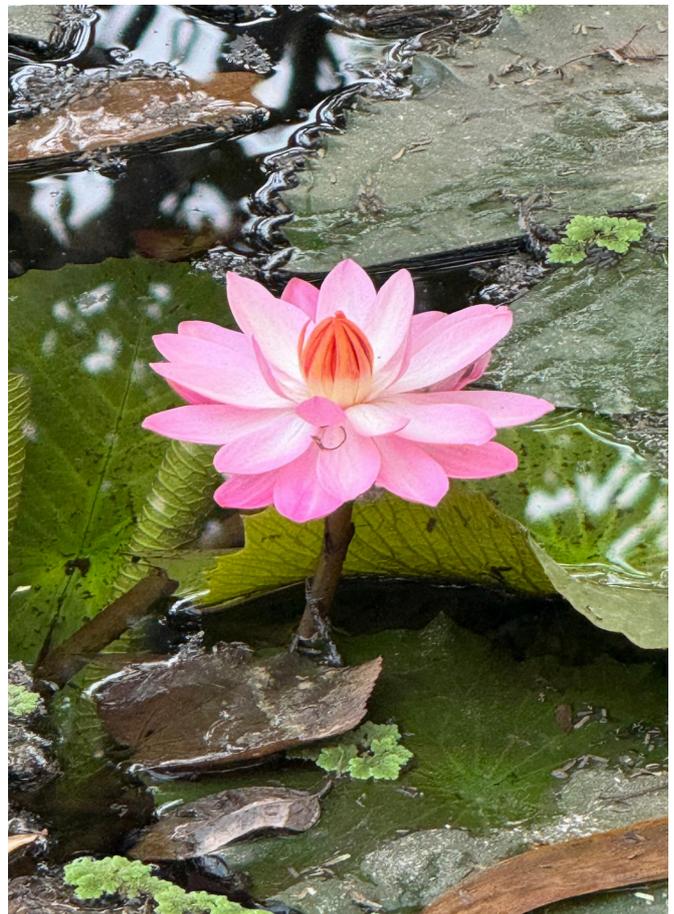
This issue also brings together two compelling anthropological reflections—one on childhood socialisation and the other on death rituals in Banaras—both questioning how societies shape human experience at life's most formative and final moments. The first reflection contrasts earlier generations, where children learned through freedom, experimentation, and self-chosen paths, with the present climate of intense parental control. Today, children's futures are often prescribed, autonomy curtailed, and identities shaped through gendered expectations. Drawing on Margaret Mead's enduring question about whether we allow children to choose among many ways of life, the

reflection warns that overprotection risks producing conformity rather than resilience. The second reflection engages with "Ashes and Eternity: The Sacred Theatre of Death and Liberation in Manikarnika Ghat, Banaras," portraying



MManikarnika as a sacred, performative landscape where death is neither hidden nor sanitised. Here, death is ritualised, witnessed, and cosmologically transformed. As a liminal space, the ghat facilitates the passage from embodied life to spiritual liberation (moksha), where fire and water, destruction and creation, coexist. Death is not viewed as pollution, but as sacred transformation—affirming continuity between life, death, and the cosmos.

As readers engage with this issue, we invite them to slow down, reflect deeply, and reconnect—with ideas, with people, and with the world around them. May 2026 be a year of conscious living, meaningful engagement, and renewed anthropological curiosity. We wish all our readers a happy, healthy, and fulfilling year ahead.



## Linguistic Anthropology in India: From Silence to Rediscovery

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

On behalf of the Anthropos India Foundation, its Founder-Chair, the entire editorial team of the Anthro Bulletin, and in my personal capacity, I extend to our readers my heartfelt wishes for a happy and fulfilling 2026. It is deeply gratifying to note that the digital Anthro Bulletin has successfully completed its first year and now steps into its second—an achievement made possible solely by your continued affection, encouragement, and patronage. May this mutually sustaining bond between the Anthro Bulletin and its readership endure and grow ever stronger in the years ahead. In this issue, I have chosen to reflect on a subfield of anthropology that is both foundational and, regrettably, in gradual decline in India—linguistic anthropology. Over the course of my decades-long engagement with teaching and research in anthropology, I have observed that while certain domains of anthropology have flourished through increasing micro-specialization, others have steadily receded from academic visibility. Among these, linguistic anthropology has perhaps suffered the most pronounced marginalization within the Indian scholarly landscape.

For readers less familiar with this discipline, linguistic anthropology constitutes one of the four core subfields of anthropology and is concerned with language as a vital key to understanding human history, culture, and biology. Although it shares several research concerns with general linguistics, linguistic anthropology is distinguished by its strong emphasis on fieldwork and by its integrative approach, situating language within broader anthropological perspectives on human life. In a country as culturally plural and linguistically diverse as India, the relevance of linguistic anthropology can scarcely be overstated. The field holds immense promise for the documentation of minority and Indigenous languages, for exploring the intersections of language with gender, ethnicity, and social hierarchy, and for examining the interconnections between historical linguistics and archaeology, among many other vital concerns.

India has long nurtured a profound and sustained engagement with the philosophy and grammar of language. One need only recall Panini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī* (6th-4th Century BC) and the saint-poet and philosopher Bhartrihari's *Nītiśataka* (6th Century CE), among many others. Bhartrihari's conviction is that *vāñī* (cultivated speech) constitutes the highest form of human adornment. Material embellishments are transient and external, whereas language—disciplined, refined, and meaningful—forms an intrinsic and imperishable virtue. Read alongside his doctrine of *Śabda-Brahman*, this verse acquires a deeper philosophical resonance: language is not merely a social instrument but a constitutive force of personhood and a pathway to intellectual and spiritual refinement. Bhartrihari's metaphorical insight that the true study of language lies not merely in its formal structure but in its living presence within human interaction gets reverberated in the contributions of Franz Boas. Realizing the significance of language in anthropology, Boas played a decisive role in integrating linguistics into the discipline through his advocacy of the "four-field approach"—a framework that continues to be upheld by many anthropology departments in the United States. Boas advanced the principle of linguistic relativism, countering the ethnocentric assumptions of his time that disgraced Indigenous American languages as "primitive" in comparison with those of non-Indigenous populations. There was no looking back since then. Most of the American anthropology departments teach linguistic anthropology as a part of their curriculum.

Scholars like Edward Sapir, Benjamin Whorf, Harold Conklin, Charles Frake, and Ward Goodenough substantially expanded the application of linguistic epistemologies to cultural analysis. Paradoxically, in India—a country whose profound linguistic diversity ought to render such inquiry indispensable—students frequently complete advanced degrees in anthropology without even a rudimentary introduction to linguistic



anthropology, let alone scholarly engagement at the doctoral level. In 2000, Shrivastava observed that, with the sole exception of Punjabi University, Patiala, no university in India maintained a dedicated department of linguistic anthropology, and that only a handful of anthropology departments offered the subject at all. But what could be the probable reasons for this neglect? Although there is no systematic empirical evidence to substantiate my assessment of the decline of linguistic anthropology in India, I could identify three interrelated factors from my own engagement with the subject for nearly five decades. Foremost among these is the pervasive influence of British anthropology on the formation of anthropological curricula in Indian universities. Because relatively few prominent British anthropologists were centrally concerned with the study of language, often relegating linguistic ethnography to the domain of linguistics, language research failed to assume a visible or integral place within anthropological inquiry. This legacy was subsequently reproduced in India, where linguistic anthropology did not emerge as a clearly articulated component of the discipline's research agenda.

A second factor lies in the nature of American anthropological influence on Indian anthropology, which remained largely confined to village studies, caste, and civilizational analyses. Consequently, the seminal contributions of John Gumperz's work on speech variation failed to attract sustained attention among Indian anthropologists. Even the works of Murray Emeneau, who was a student of Edward Sapir and was an authority on Dravidian linguistics, could not impress Indian anthropologists. A third factor, in my view, is the subtle yet pervasive scepticism among many anthropologists regarding the analytical value of linguistic anthropology. In recent years, anthropology in India has increasingly gravitated toward populist and policy-oriented themes that promise greater access to funding and enhanced employability within the "development" sector. While such areas of inquiry are by no means insignificant, it is telling that one encounters far fewer rigorous doctoral theses on kinship or language than on topics such as reproductive and child health, ethnomedicine, the evaluation of NGO interventions, or self-help groups.

At a historical moment when languages are rapidly disappearing from the global linguistic landscape, linguistic anthropology bears a particular responsibility in efforts toward the documentation and revitalization of endangered tongues. As Ayesha Kidwai observes, "languages are a treasure trove of knowledge about a region's flora, fauna and medicinal plants. Usually, this information is passed from generation to generation. However, when a language declines, that knowledge system is completely gone. With the loss of language comes the loss of everything in culture and loss of solidarity, the loss of Man himself" (Kidwai 2020). Language loss thus entails the extinction of entire epistemic traditions embedded in everyday practice and intergenerational transmission.

## Makar Sankranti – New Beginnings

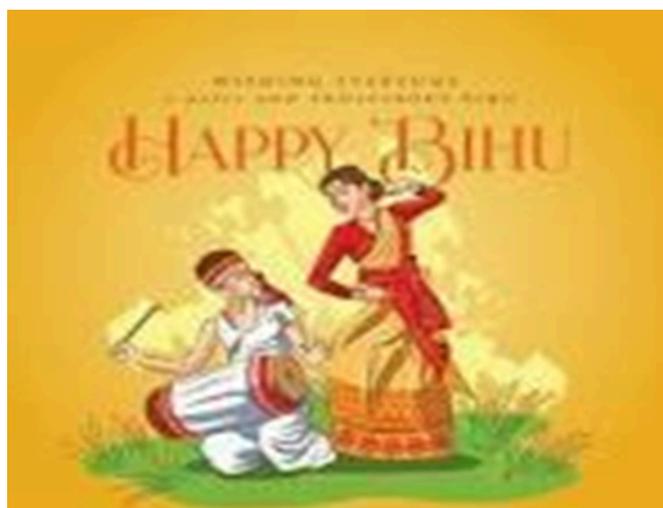


By Dr Rajni Lamba

### Makar Sankranti: Dawn of a New Year and Fresh Beginnings.

Indians have some wonderful markers for the changing seasons and the turn of the year. The severe winter chill is greeted respectfully with bonfires and a number of socio-religious rituals that have deep symbolic significance for the followers of the vast Hindu fountainhead of philosophy, dignity and devotion. Makar Sankranti is a vibrant harvest festival that is celebrated with great verve and zeal across India. It is a major observance marking the transition of the Sun into the zodiac sign of Capricorn (Makar). Observed with diverse regional traditions, it welcomes longer days and signifies hope for fresher beginnings, abundance and prosperity tempered by a significant inclination towards spiritual renewal.

Many religious procedures have been ritualized over the centuries in many different regions and across various populations of the country. The gathering of the family and community at bonfires on the night before the dawn of Makar Sankranti is commonly celebrated across several areas of the northern parts of the country that are battling the winter chill. This signifies the Lohri festival. The men, women and children walk slowly in circles around the bonfire, throwing peanuts, popcorn and sweets made with jaggery and sesame seeds into and around the bonfire. After the first round, they take another round of the bonfire and sprinkle a mixed fluid of fresh milk and water with every step. Then the elders of the family instruct everyone to pick up nine pieces of the groundnuts and popcorn they had thrown earlier into the fire. Then they exchange gifts of peanuts, popcorn, sweetmeats called gajak [sheets of jaggery and peanuts or jaggery and sesame seeds] and revri [smaller thin wafers of the sesame seeds and jaggery or caramelized sugar]. Til Bhuga [milk and sesame seeds powder made into bite-sized balls and coated with sesame seeds] is another favourite sweetmeat. These actions have a deep symbolic meaning with varying significance across spatial gradients and populations. The bonfire is lit by collecting old discarded pieces of wood, furniture and even old wooden brooms and setting them ablaze at twilight on Lohri, the eve of Makar Sankranti. The chant of 'Til sadae paap sadae...' is usually an invocation to the Gods that, as the 'old things burn, they shall burn away the sins of the past' and bring the warmth of a new beginning during the cold and dreary winters of the North.



The festival of Makar Sankranti celebrates new beginnings, the harvest, and the transition of the Sun into the northern hemisphere, bringing prosperity and positive energy. Celebrations often include kite flying, bonfires, holy dips, and feasting on sesame and jaggery sweets. Makar Sankranti is a vibrant harvest festival celebrated across India, marking the transition of the Sun into the zodiac sign of Capricorn (Makar). While it is celebrated with diverse regional traditions, it welcomes longer days and signifies hope, abundance, and spiritual renewal. Unlike many of the other Indian festivals based on the lunar calendar, Makar Sankranti always occurs on a fixed solar day, marking the gradual lengthening of the days from this day onwards.

### **Historical Perspective and Regional Deviations of the Makar Sankranti Festival**

The festival can be traced back to ancient agrarian societies, where the end of the winter solstice generates the desire to look forward to renewed agricultural activity. Makar Sankranti has been mentioned in the ancient Hindu scriptures like the Mahabharata and the Puranas and has been vastly recognized for its spiritual value. It is celebrated as a period when families give thanks for the passing of a safe winter and the arrival of the signs of spring when Nature renews itself with renewed energy and vigour. Makar Sankranti is known by different names and traditions across India's diverse regions, making it a truly pan-Indian festival.

It is celebrated as Pongal in Tamil Nadu and several other pockets of the boundary areas, where it marks the onset of celebrations over a four-day harvest festival, which is highlighted with the eating and distribution of sweet rice. All the rural households fondly display their beautifully decorated cows and bulls. It is a festival of thanksgiving. The Lohri festival is a hugely significant celebration in the Punjab and Haryana region, where it is marked by bonfires, folk songs, and dancing on the previous evening. It is one of the most celebrative festivals of the year. The families hold celebrations especially for new brides and newborns in the family by inviting their relatives and friends over for meals. There is a ritual exchange of gifts and giveaways like sweetmeats and clothes. The observance of Uttarayan is widely celebrated in the Gujarat and Maharashtra regions. This festival is famous for its large-scale massive kite festivals. Families and especially children look forward to the preparation of local savoury dishes like undhiyu and jalebi, which are made and distributed across households and served in large quantities at family and community celebrations.

The festival of Magh Bihu or Bhogali Bihu is celebrated in the eastern States of Assam, Manipur and Tripura. It is celebrated with ritual dancing and feasts, preparation of traditional huts or meji and several community gatherings. There is a liberal exchange of sweets and clothes in the household where the people are dressed up in traditional attire. The Poush Sankranti is a hallmark of West Bengal. It is marked by the preparation and distribution of the pithe-puli sweets, the holding of colourful fairs, and river bathing. It is a celebration where new clothes are worn and distributed among families and communities.

It is earmarked as the Khichdi Parv in areas of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It is known for cooking khichdi [a gruel of rice and lentils] that is made as a ritual practice. The khichdi is distributed among the homes of daughters and sisters and is also liberally given as daan or alms among the lesser privileged. The festival is highlighted by ritual bathing in the holy rivers.

### **Specific Customs and Rituals that mark Makar Sankranti**

Makar Sankranti is filled with unique customs and rituals that vary across India and are tied to real-life experiences. Each custom highlights *joi de vivre*, immense gratitude, *bonhomie* and an undying celebrative community spirit. Some of the common customs observed across the country are:

- Kite Flying, which marks the onset of sunshine and re-establishment of active community life after a long winter of reduced and even suspended activities. People gather on rooftops with their colourful and attractive kites to compete in kite-flying competitions. This custom is symbolic of signifying freedom and light.
- Puja and Prayers: Special morning baths and worship at temples or rivers symbolize spiritual renewal. Offerings of clothes, essence, flowers, sweetmeats and deep expression of gratitude are common. The entire household is given special attention to present an aura of cleanliness and decorum.
- Ritual exchange of Tilgul: There is widespread gifting of sesame laddoos (tilgul), and sweets promote harmony. In the North, til and gur are offered to family relatives and guests during the celebrations.
- Lighting Bonfires: Particularly in North India (as Lohri), people gather around bonfires, singing and dancing to celebrate warmth and prosperity.
- Donations and acts of Charity: Offering clothes, food, or grain to those in need represents gratitude and selflessness. Practice respectful giving and avoid wastage
- Wearing Black: In Maharashtra, wearing black clothes during this period and retaining the body temperature at a comfortable level is believed to absorb warmth from the sun during winter, blending tradition with practicality.
- Til Mooli Chakhna: Punjabi households give prominence to the eating of til or sesame seeds and mooli or radish – a combination that has significance in the ayurvedic knowledge of a changing season and the specific detoxification and oxidation required by the gastric elements of the human body.
- Po Ridha ma khada: Literally meaning 'making in the month of Po [mid-December] and eating in the month of Magh [mid-January]'. This pertains to the making of 'saag', a rich food of Punjab [made with green leafy vegetables and copious quantities of ghee or clarified butter], which is symbolically prepared before Lohri and eaten on Maghi Sangrandh or Makar Sankranti. This ritual signifies the continuity and eternity of the lifecycle of human beings.

On Makar Sankranti, people donate liberally the food items like sesame seeds, jaggery, rice, lentils (cooked into a gruel called khichdi), warm blankets, clothes, and ghee for providing necessary nutrition and a rich winter diet. Such acts are considered highly auspicious for bringing blessings, prosperity, and removing negativity. Annadaan (food donation) is considered a significant act of charity.

#### Commonly made donations on Makar Sankranti:

- Til or Sesame Seeds: Using and donating til, especially black sesame, holds great significance during Makar Sankranti
- Jaggery (Gur): Gifting and donating jaggery signifies sweetness, success, and good health.
- Khichdi [gruel made of rice and lentils]: A dish of rice and lentils, it is a major form of donation, often made with urad dal. It is gifted to married daughters and sisters of the household. It is symbolic of prosperity and warding off evil, besides giving the strength to combat all obstacles.
- Blankets and Warm Clothes: These winter essentials are distributed among the less privileged to provide warmth and to protect against the severe winter cold, especially in the Northern parts of the country.
- Ghee (Clarified Butter): Donating ghee brings positivity and prosperity.
- Fruits: Giving fruits is considered a nourishing and auspicious donation and comprises Annadaan
- Cow Donation (Gaudan): Donating cows or fodder for cattle is believed to bring immense blessings and prosperity.
- Utensils: Donating metal utensils, sometimes with some hidden coins (Gupt Lakshmi), is considered an auspicious daan or contribution to charity.

#### Significance of Donation (Daan):

Random acts of charity during the severe winters and especially on the day of Makar Sankranti [which is considered the peak of winter] are believed to remove negative karma and attract divine blessings. On the whole, it is a humanitarian gesture where those who have abundance can share with those who are less privileged. During the harsh winter months, there is a paucity of resources due to labour being reduced, the length of the daytime hours cut down and little scope for fruitful daily wage work. This is a crucial time for those who subsist on daily wages. For this reason, any form of relief is welcome for the poor and underprivileged.

To summarize, Makar Sankranti (2026) offers a blend of traditions that promote togetherness and symbolize the renewal of life afresh as the winter gives way to spring. It has vital significance for the families, communities and groups living and working together in various parts of the country.



## The YAM Festival among the Igbo



By Àgbède Oláolúwa Babátúndé

Many Nigerian tribes eat yam as a staple food. Its significance varies between communities. Yam is important in the political, economic, religious, and social lives of Igbo people. The Igbo people constitute one of Africa's largest ethnic groups. They are Nigeria's third-largest ethnic group, living primarily in the country's southeastern region. The Igbos are predominantly Christian, but they maintain traditional practices and values. They practice a variety of art forms, including masquerades, and they hold various festivals, one of which is the Yam festival.

In Igbo communities, the annual arrival of yam in the farming calendar is not taken lightly. It is carefully planned, announced, and celebrated. The Yam festival, also known as "Iri Iji or Iwa Iji," represents much more than a successful harvest. It is seen as a symbol of renewal, a reaffirmation of community life, and a show of gratitude to "Ala," the goddess of earth and fertility. For centuries, this festival has shaped how the Igbo people define work, success, and their relationship with the land. Yam means more to the Igbo than just food. Although it feeds families, supports local markets, and anchors farming cycles, its importance goes beyond nutrition. Yam is known as the "King of Crops," and their cultivation requires royal qualities such as strength, patience, and discipline. As a result of its status as the King of Crop, its annual arrival is marked by certain rituals. Before anyone eats it, elders must make sacrifices to thank their ancestors and the earth goddess, Ala. In ancient times, eating yam without these rituals was considered dangerous. The sacrifices demonstrate that farming is a collaboration between spiritual and natural forces, and gratitude must precede enjoyment.

Once the rituals are completed, the mood shifts to dancing and rejoicing. Masquerades representing the ancestors will begin to move around with various specialized dance steps. Songs are sung in praise of well-known and hardworking farmers in order to celebrate hard work and condemn laziness. This is how knowledge is passed down from one generation to the next. The festival transforms into a classroom without walls, where ancient knowledge is taught. Farming plays a significant role in the Igbo concept of success. In ancient times, large yam bans represented great wealth and responsibility. A man with such an investment was regarded as someone who could not only feed himself but also feed others, which earned him respect and influence. The yam festival provides a platform for recognizing such attributes and achievements as yam tubers are displayed and donated. Tuber sizes and numbers are carefully considered when displaying and donating them. A larger yam is seen as more favor from the goddess of earth, Ala, and a blessing from one's 'chi'



Figure: Display of new Yam



Figure: Women dancing with the new yam in a procession

(chi is regarded as one's head/inner being). The most lasting impression of this festival is its social impact. It brings families together. The Igbo people are migratory by nature. They are excellent entrepreneurs who travel extensively for their businesses. The Yam Festival is one of the festivals that brings people back to their communities. Age-grade groups hold meetings, and elders provide support, counsel, and resolve any disputes. The festival encourages community bonding as families exchange gifts. It also serves as a bridge between the old and new generations. Children who are primarily born outside of communities are introduced and become acquainted with their heritage. In subtle ways, the celebration fosters marriage bonds, kinship networks, and long-term collaboration.

The yam festival, like many other festivals, has evolved to meet new challenges. Christianity has influenced or combined some rituals. Some rites have been replaced by prayers in the church. Urbanization has also reduced the number of young people who farm. However, this festival has not vanished or been abandoned; instead, it has found new expressions. In cities, it could be symbolic rather than agricultural. In diaspora communities, it serves as a powerful reminder of home. What matters is not the precise form, but the meaning it conveys.

Finally, this festival serves as a reminder of culture's unique characteristic: it interacts, adjusts, grows, and survives. This is because culture is inextricably linked to human needs. For the Igbo, this festival represents how the past informs the present. When they celebrate the yam festival, they honor work, community, and continuity. They strengthen the relationship between the spiritual and natural forces. Long after the last dance and the drums stop, the festival's values continue to shape everyday life in subtle but long-lasting ways.



Figure: Masquerade Procession

## Saraswati Puja: A Celebration of Wisdom, Knowledge, and Art



By Ria Ghosh

Saraswati Puja is a revered festival in India, dedicated to Goddess Saraswati, the Hindu deity of wisdom, learning, music, and arts. Observed primarily by students, scholars, and artists, this festival holds immense cultural and spiritual significance. It is celebrated with great enthusiasm across various regions of India, especially in Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, and Assam, as well as in Nepal and other Hindu communities worldwide.

### The Legend of Goddess Saraswati

Goddess Saraswati is one of the principal deities in Hindu mythology and is regarded as the consort of Lord Brahma, the creator of the universe. She is often depicted as a graceful goddess in a white sari, symbolizing purity and knowledge. She holds a veena (a musical instrument), representing the harmony of knowledge and arts. Her four hands represent the mind, intellect, alertness, and ego, which are crucial aspects of learning and wisdom. She rides a swan, signifying her ability to differentiate between good and evil, truth and falsehood. The most well-known mythological reference to Saraswati is found in Hindu scriptures, where she emerges from Lord Brahma's mouth, embodying wisdom and intellect. Another legend associates her with the river Saraswati, believed to have once been a mighty river that nurtured the Vedic civilization. Over time, the river dried up, but the goddess continued to be revered as the eternal source of knowledge and wisdom.

### Significance of Saraswati Puja

Saraswati Puja is a festival deeply rooted in Indian culture, emphasizing the importance of education, wisdom, and artistic expression. It marks the arrival of spring and is often celebrated on Vasant Panchami, the fifth day of the Hindu month of Magha (January-February). This day is considered highly auspicious, as it is believed that Goddess Saraswati bestows her devotees with knowledge and enlightenment. For students, Saraswati Puja holds immense significance. Books, pens, musical instruments, and other learning tools are placed at the feet of the goddess as an offering, symbolizing a commitment to acquiring knowledge. Many schools and colleges organize special prayers and cultural events, encouraging students to embrace the pursuit of wisdom.

### Regional Celebrations of Saraswati Puja

#### 1. Bengal and Eastern India

In West Bengal, Saraswati Puja is a major festival, especially among students and educational institutions. It is often referred to as the "Bengali Valentine's Day," as young people dress in traditional attire and celebrate with enthusiasm. Girls wear yellow sarees, symbolizing prosperity and energy, while boys don kurta-pajamas. Schools and colleges remain closed, and students gather to

the goddess. Idols of Saraswati are adorned with flowers, books, and sweets. In the evening, cultural programs and musical performances take place.

#### 2. North India

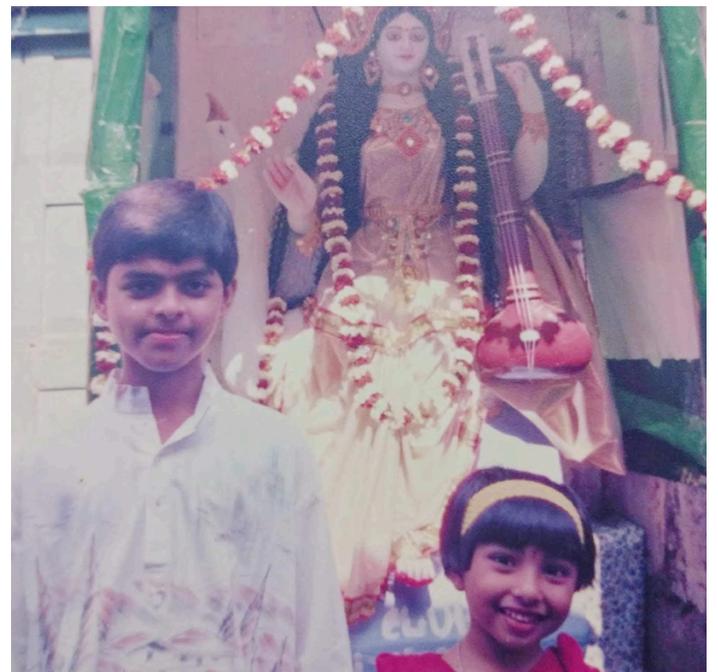
In Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh, Saraswati Puja is observed with devotion. Families clean their homes and set up small altars for the goddess. Special offerings, including sweets like boondi laddoo and kheer, are prepared. Devotees also engage in charity, distributing books and educational materials to underprivileged children.

#### 3. Odisha

In Odisha, Saraswati Puja is known as Basanta Panchami and is celebrated with fervour. Schools and colleges organize grand celebrations, with students participating in cultural activities such as poetry recitations, dance performances, and music competitions. The goddess is worshipped in beautifully decorated pandals (temporary shrines), and the festival concludes with the immersion of the idols in water bodies.

#### 4. South India

In Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh, Saraswati Puja is often celebrated as part of Navaratri in the autumn season. However, many people also observe Vasant Panchami with prayers and offerings. In Kerala, students initiate their learning process (Vidyarambham) in the presence of Saraswati idols, marking their first step into the world of knowledge.



My brother and I celebrating Saraswati Puja in the early 2000s in Kolkata

## Rituals and Traditions of Saraswati Puja

### 1. Invocation of the Goddess

On the day of Saraswati Puja, devotees wake up early, take a holy bath, and dress in yellow attire, which is considered auspicious. A clean space is prepared for the puja, and an idol or image of Saraswati is placed on a decorated altar.

### 2. Offerings and Prayers

Books, musical instruments, and other educational tools are placed near the deity. Devotees offer flowers, fruits, sweets, and coconut to the goddess. A traditional dish called khichdi is prepared and shared among family members and guests. Special prayers, including the chanting of Saraswati Vandana ("Ya Kundendu Tusharahara Dhavala..."), are recited to invoke the blessings of the goddess.

### 3. Akshar-Abhyasam (Initiation of Learning)

One of the most significant traditions associated with Saraswati Puja is Akshar-Abhyasam, where young children write their first letters under the guidance of elders or priests. This marks the beginning of their educational journey. Many schools conduct this ceremony, making it a memorable event for children.

### 4. Cultural Celebrations

Since Saraswati is the goddess of arts and music, cultural events play a significant role in the festival. Schools, colleges, and community organizations arrange recitations, dance performances, and music concerts.

### 5. Visarjan (Immersion of the Idol)

The festival concludes with the immersion of the idol in rivers or water bodies. Devotees bid farewell to the goddess with chants and prayers, hoping for her return next year.



### The Role of Saraswati Puja in Modern Society

Saraswati Puja is not merely a religious event but a celebration of intellectual and creative pursuits. In today's world, where education and knowledge are more important than ever, the significance of Saraswati Puja has grown beyond traditional boundaries. The festival encourages individuals to respect knowledge, embrace wisdom, and cultivate artistic expression. Educational institutions take this opportunity to emphasize the importance of education and literacy. Libraries, research centres, and schools conduct special programs to spread awareness about the power of knowledge. The festival also serves as an inspiration for young artists, musicians, and writers to hone their skills and contribute to the world of creativity.

### Conclusion

Saraswati Puja is a festival that beautifully blends devotion, learning, and cultural celebrations. It is a time when people come together to honor knowledge and artistic expression. As society continues to evolve, the values associated with Saraswati Puja—wisdom, creativity, and enlightenment remain as relevant as ever. Whether celebrated in a grand manner or in a simple home setting, the spirit of the festival remains unchanged: a deep reverence for learning and a heartfelt devotion to the goddess of wisdom. May Goddess Saraswati bless all with knowledge, creativity, and prosperity!



## Manabasa Gurubara: Odisha's traditional festival of art and social equality



By Satya Sundar Digvijay

Manabasa Gurubara is a sacred ritual, celebrated on every Thursday of the Margashira month as per the Odia calendar. The festival is related to the worship of the goddess Laxmi. It is believed that Maa Laxmi gives us wealth, purity and prosperity. From an anthropological perspective, this festival provides significant insights into the arts, culture and social values of Odisha.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

The roots of Manabasa Gurubara lie in the agricultural society of Odisha. The month of Margashira comes after the rich harvest season, and during this period, the Odia household is filled with new paddy and rice. The term Manabasa is a combination of two words. The "Mana", which is the important symbol of this festival, is a vessel traditionally made from bamboo, jute or brass, and is used to measure rice or paddy. Another term, "Basa", means placing. Thus, Manabasa means worshipping the fulfilled Mana with paddy.

### MYTHOLOGICAL CONTEXT:

The Laxmi Purana, which was composed around the 16<sup>th</sup> century by poet Balaram Das, plays an important role in the ritual. According to the purana goddess Laxmi is thrown out from her house, Shree Jagannath temple, by her husband Lord Jagannath, upon the advice of his elder brother Lord Balabhadra. The reason is maa Laxmi visited the house of Shriya Chandaluni, a lower caste woman, after being satisfied by her worship. As Maa Laxmi left the temple, both of the brothers found difficulties in getting food and shelter. From this incident, they both realised their mistake and brought Maa Laxmi back. But goddess Laxmi agrees to return to the temple on the conditions of there would be no discrimination of caste and creed on earth.

### THE RITUAL:

The preparation begins early in the morning with cleaning the house with cow dung paste and water. In Odisha, cleanliness symbolises mental purity and readiness to attract wealth and prosperity.

### Chita / Jhota:

It is one of the most recognizable characteristics in the festival, where different decorative drawings are made using rice paste on the floor and walls.

Women create different motifs like:

1. Lotuses
2. Footprints of Maa Laxmi
3. And other geometric, non-geometric patterns



Figure 1: Women making Jhota/chita



Figure 2: Jhota with lotus and foot prints



Figure 3: The Sacred Laxmi Purana



**Figure 4:** Worship of Maa Laxmi and Mana filled with Paddy



**Figure 5:** A Dhana Beni (Paddy Braid)

The Mana is filled with paddy and decorated with vermilion, sandal, turmeric and flowers. Sometimes betel nuts, mango leaves and some grains are also placed around it. A Dhana beni (paddy braid) is also used in the ritual.

Women of the houses recite verses from the Laxmi Purana. All homemade foods are worshipped as offerings, such as: Pitha (Kakra, Manda, Chakuli), Khechudi, Khiri (Rice puddings), etc.

Interestingly, the ritual is performed entirely by women of the house. It is one of the festivals where women are the primary religious authority without a priest.

This highlights:

1. The continuity of matrifocal tradition in Odisha
2. And the role of women in maintaining household property.

**CONCLUSION:**

The festival Manabasa Gurubara holds major anthropological significance because it places women at the centre of cultural tradition within the households. The festival also shows the connection of people to their land, grains and natural resources. The Laxmi Purana adds strong social dimensions by promoting values like equality and devotion. It also challenges caste discrimination through the story of Laxmi visiting Shriya, a woman from a lower caste. Through this festival, the young girls of the house gain the knowledge of making jhoti and how to recite the purana from the elderly women. Overall, the festival plays a key role in maintaining Odia identity, connecting art, culture, traditions, social values and gender roles, which continue to guide and prosper the community till today.



**Figure 4:** Offerings include Mana Pitha, Khechudi

Prof. Anjali D. Kurane



*Interview by Saba Farhin*

Prof. Dr. Anjali Kurane is a Senior Professor of Anthropology and former Head of the Department at Savitribai Phule Pune University, where she has also served as Director of the School of Human Studies, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, Director of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences, and Coordinator for Social Sciences and Humanities. She is a distinguished socio-cultural, development, and urban anthropologist, internationally recognised for her contributions to tribal, women, caste, and ethnicity studies in India. With over 34 years of teaching, 36 years of research, and 21 years of administrative experience, Prof. Kurane has held major academic leadership positions and served on statutory bodies, Boards of Studies, Academic Councils, and Senates of four universities—Savitribai Phule Pune University, University of Hyderabad, Karnataka University, and Pondicherry University. She has published eight books and over 65 research articles, presented 111 papers at national and international forums, and has publications from Cambridge, London, Vietnam, Germany, the UK, and Australia. She currently serves on the editorial and advisory boards of four journals.

Her research interests include urban, rural, tribal and women’s development, caste and gender studies, ethnicity, social mobility, exclusion, urbanisation, migration, and socio-cultural change, supported by extensive fieldwork among tribal, rural, and urban communities.

Since 2011, she has worked closely with Maharashtra government bodies, serving as a founding member and governing body member of the Tribal Research and Training Institute (TRTI), and as Chair of the Faculty of Humanities for the Maharashtra National Education Policy Committee (2022). She authored India’s first handbook on scrutinising tribal identity claims and is currently leading an ethnographic study of 45 tribal groups in Maharashtra. She has received international recognition as a Staff Fellow at Oxford Brookes University, UK, and Ghent University, Belgium, strengthening global academic and policy collaborations. In this interview, she shares insights from her journey in anthropology and offers perspectives on the evolving scope and future of the discipline.

**What early influences or experiences inspired you to choose anthropology as your academic path?**

Basically, I am a science student, having a degree in zoology discipline, accidentally & suddenly entered Anthropology and was charmed by reading its syllabus focusing on a holistic viewpoint on human casing biological, social, and cultural aspects. And then I never went back to my basic discipline



of zoology. Initially as a science student I was fascinated towards Biological Anthropology ...but later on when I came across Urban and Development Anthropology, being an urban girl that intelligently stimulates me more as it’s straight associated with my everyday life. I comprehend that the study of society and communities is more thought-provoking mostly because it deals with inherently complex, specific, and speedily changing human behaviour rather than immovable physical laws. Anthropology developed my understanding to ethnic differences, broader and deeper understanding to humanity and condense preconceptions. My critical thinking and communication, forward-thinking stimulated . It benefited me in navigating diverse, global, and transnational, multicultural environments. Its holistic, comparative, interdisciplinary and integrative approach moved me to choose anthropology as my academic path.

**Among your many academic and institutional contributions, which do you consider most meaningful, and what impact do you feel they have had?**

I feel my current research project on an ethnographic study of all 45 Scheduled Tribal groups that include 181 subgroups listed in the Scheduled Tribes list of Maharashtra state is the most meaningful contribution in research. It is one of the leading tribal projects on tribal cultural affinity from an Anthropological perspective in India. And one of the largest and most comprehensive projects encompassing all the parameters of ethnography. Its comprehensive and scientifically rigorous ethnographic study of all 45 Scheduled Tribes of Maharashtra ensures the authentic documentation of traditional cultural characteristics & representation of their identities, traditions and socio-cultural heritage. This is an enormous work in the field of tribal and marginalized spheres that would create

abundant, significant and considerable literature on the tribes of Maharashtra aimed at revolutionising the policy framework, government records and providing a body of work on the tribal culture never attempted before in totality. Till today, government official has remained dependent on the resources written by the British and American Anthropologists employed by the British Government with a colonial approach; however, this study would be one of the coveted efforts to decolonise tribal studies through a reliable, authentic source of literature of all the 45 Scheduled Tribal groups of Maharashtra. It will set a precedent for other tribes also in the nation and the world at large. Some of these tribal groups include Pthe articularly Vulnerable Tribes Groups ( PVTGs), namely, Katkari, Kolam and the Madia. The project will be one of the pertinent studies towards preserving the culture of these tribes specially when they're on the verge of depletion and marginalisation.

This study would strengthen the scrutiny process of tribal identity claims and assist the Government to prevent pseudo tribalization. In addition, this study would also be helpful to find out the number of extinct tribes listed in the Scheduled tribes list of Maharashtra.

At the Department of Anthropology, Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune, I have started Business Anthropology, Digital Anthropology, UI/UX Research and Anthropology of Artificial Intelligence courses for MA/MSc. students at the Department of Anthropology, SPPU, Pune, from 2019 onwards. Every year, students, along with traditional anthropological training in Tribal Fieldworks and Research Training, learn about these new areas of study in anthropology. A few of the students pursue their dissertation research in Business Anthropology, Digital Anthropology, and UI/UX Research. We have produced dissertation research on topics like- Ethnography of Corporate Organization, Gaming Culture, Gender pay gap in technology companies, Anthropological Study of Gig Workers, and a few others. These research projects and training on digital tools give students more advantages in getting jobs in big technology companies, Smart City initiatives, Digital platforms, Product development, Consumer research, User Research, etc. and help make careers in the booming field of technology on global platforms. In addition, I also started courses such as Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: An Anthropologist, Indian Anthropologists course, where I added Savitribai Phule, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, Chatrapati Shahu Maharaj, Raja Ram Mohan Roy to study their contribution to Indian Society and Culture from Anthropological Perspectives, Anthropology of Social exclusion and inclusion, Anthropology of food and food culture and many more. As we became more globalised and tech averse; Anthropology and anthropological perspective is much more important

than ever before.

### **How do you see the discipline of anthropology evolving in response to contemporary social changes, particularly in the Indian context?**

Anthropology has long been a lens through which we examine how societies evolve, adapt, and transform. In the contemporary era, marked by rapid globalization, urbanization, and technological shifts, anthropology plays a crucial role in interpreting and influencing these changes. It helps us understand not just what is happening, but why, and how different groups experience these transformations unevenly.

As an Anthropology professor, I often emphasize how our discipline in India has a unique trajectory: born under colonial scrutiny, reshaped by nationalist fervour, and now thriving in postcolonial critiques and urban realities. In the Indian context, this relevance is particularly pronounced due to the country's immense diversity—linguistic, cultural, religious, and socioeconomic—and its ongoing journey through postcolonial development, economic liberalization, and social reforms. Anthropology has historically shaped the relationship between the state and society here, contributing to what scholars describe as India's "intellectual decolonization." Early Indian anthropologists like G.S. Ghurye, influenced by British training but awakened by nationalist movements, used the discipline to contest colonial ideologies of racial superiority and reconstruct notions of "Indian tradition." They helped forge the Nehruvian ideal of "unity in diversity," which remains a cornerstone of Indian policy.

Anthropology in India emerged not as an academic pursuit but as a colonial tool for governance. The British needed to classify, categorize, and control India's vast diversity—castes, tribes, religions, and regions—to administer the empire efficiently. Then, Indian scholars challenged colonial stereotypes, emphasizing cultural dynamism, historical context, and indigenous perspectives. They shifted from mere description to analysis, contesting racial determinism and portraying India as a composite civilization. These scholars used anthropology to counter colonial narratives, fostering intellectual decolonization during the freedom struggle. After independence (1950 onwards), marked anthropology's "golden age." Independence brought focus on development, nation-building, and social justice. Tribal studies continued but expanded to villages as "little communities" reflecting broader society. American influences (e.g., Chicago School) blended with Indian approaches, emphasizing fieldwork, caste dynamics, and change. Tribal ethnography evolved from isolation-focused monographs to integration analyses, influenced by policies like the tribal sub-plan and constitutional safeguards. As India urbanised rapidly post-1991 liberalisation, anthropologists moved beyond

rural/tribal foci. Urban studies emerged in the 1970s–80s but boomed later, examining migration, slums, identity, globalization, and inequality in cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Pune, Kolkata, and Bangalore. This shift reflected methodological adaptation: ethnography now captured fluid urban spaces, informal economies, and hybrid cultures. Key themes include caste in cities, gender dynamics, environmental issues, and digital influences.

As we are stepping into 2026, where technology reshapes everything from daily life in bustling Maharashtra cities to global policy, it's thrilling to explore how our discipline is boldly venturing into uncharted territories. Anthropology, once stereotyped as the study of distant tribes or ancient artefacts, is now a powerhouse in modern domains like business anthropology, digital anthropology, UI/UX research, and design anthropology. This evolution is driven by anthropology's core strengths: understanding human behaviour, cultural contexts, and social dynamics in an increasingly tech-saturated world. How anthropology intersects with technology and change in the AI era, its role in crafting better products and services, tackling ethical dilemmas like AI biases, surveillance, and data sovereignty, and finally, practical advice for students like those at Pune University or elsewhere in India on pursuing these paths. These new domains not only amplify anthropology's societal impact but also open lucrative career doors in MNCs, corporations, government, and international development. Let's unpack this exciting shift.

**What guidance would you offer to students and early-career researchers who aspire to build a career in anthropology today?**

For students in India—perhaps at institutions like Savitribai Phule Pune University diving into these

domains starts with interdisciplinary education. A career in anthropology offers a multipurpose, human-centric career path focusing on thoughtful various cultures, complex human behaviours, and human and cultural evolution. It nurtures critical thinking, new ways of thinking, understands the diverse culture, cross-cultural communication, and provides holistic problem-solving skills. And provides Numerous Career Openings in several sectors such as international development, NGOs, government agencies, corporate, business, academic research, museums, forensic science and healthcare. Anthropologists get opportunities to analyse and help solve contemporary issues in the arenas such as development, health, environmental policy, and social justice.

Pursue certificates in AI ethics, digital methods, or UX design alongside anthropology degrees. Study courses on "AI for Everyone" or "Design Thinking," blending with ethnographic training. Hands-on projects, like studying Digitization and AI's role in Pune's smart city initiatives, build portfolios.

Engage in action anthropology—collaborate with NGOs on ethical AI for tribal data sovereignty or government projects under INDIAai. This amplifies voices in policy, like advising on surveillance laws

Job prospects are robust: In MNCs like Google India or Infosys, anthropologists earn competitive salaries (median ₹10-15 lakhs starting) as UX researchers or AI ethicists. Big corps seek them for innovation consulting; government roles in NITI Aayog or international development (e.g., UNDP) involve policy-making on tech equity. Leverage tools like GIS for digital ethnography or AI for data analysis to stand out. Networks like EPIC (Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference) connect you globally.



## Field report: for visiting Kadar Kudi in Valparai (taluk)

By Dhanwinkumar K S

On the date of November 06th we started our journey to Coimbatore to visit the Kadar kudi in the valparai taluk where precisely saying there are two settlements I visited first kudi is thepakulamedu and another kudi id udumamparai. And in the first kudi (thepakulamedu) it is more interesting as well as difficult for me like I heard from a person who is from that particular kuditelling about those story where they first stayed and why the relocated from the first resided place and now what are the issues currently facing in the new kudi where he told all these things in a walk towards the settlement. Now let's come to the part what are the things he told in that journey first thing he said about the relocation thing like the first kudi they stayed is known as kalarkudi because of the landslide after 2 years of struggle like they protested for the land for their livelihood and then they relocated from kalarkudi to thepakulamedu in this kudi (thepakulamedu) they were past 4 years and the issues they are facing in the thepakulamedu is there is no electricity facility in that kudi where the government provided solar panels to them for the alternate for electricity but it is not an efficient plan to contribute an development program and there is no transport facility in that kudi as well as no roads were constructed in that area they use to walk to ration shop for 1 hour to 1½ hours of walk to the ration shop from there kudi the housing for the village people were not arranged properly the toilet and bathroom facilities are not facilitated to that people these are the things were I witnessed in that kudi. When it comes to their cultural way of activities, they were unique as well as acculturated with the Hindu kind of practice. For instance, they were worshipping their own gods, and on the other side, the use to worship the Hindu gods as well and there are approximately 22 families in the thepakulamedu kudi. Coming to their marriage system, they were unique in that way. Kadar people use to decorate their house in bamboo as well as eeathai elai, which is collected from the forest and in their marriage, they use to make a small stage for the bride and groom. The stage is made up of mud. In both the kudi, there are poultry rearing are there, like roosters, hens are used to maintain them. So far, these are the things I witnessed in this kudi. In the second kudi which is udumamparai the way to that kudi is too difficult like the forest department didn't make a proper road facility to that village like it is filled with rocks like the people asked them to put steps like way but the pour the rocks like shredded leafs in that way and it is not finished well and the houses are built by rotary club which is boards are placed like that



Figure 1: Kadar tribe with a bow



Figure 2: Processing of Mara manjal



Figure 3: Traditional dance performed in 16<sup>th</sup> day ceremony

but the most of the things are made by the kudi people, as if they didn't assist in building the houses, and only steel roofs are only given by them but they took the credit for this project. Coming to there is 16th day death ceremony was happened when I was going to that village where it is more distinct way of practice among the Kadar community were they use to build a small hut like structure to the deceased person and they place padayal (offering) to that person like shirt, dhoti, food what he likes, mirror with the lamp (vilaku) are placed in that small hut with a photo of that deceased first day they will be a gathering of people from different kudi's to assemble in that kudi after that they use to start to dance in that ceremony which is more unique dances like (kurangatam, thavalai attam, kozhi attam) is one of the greatest example is kurangattam for their relation with the forest the depicts the forest poachers who hunts the monkey and how it is affect and got tortured by those people and hunt down by the people and got sell in a auction and this dance use to tell about the grief and the problems around them and how they more connected to the forest environment like each and every animals were been represented in their dances there are different kinds of dances are there in Kadar but this is example for that. Coming to music the instruments played by the people are karambu, urumi, chandai are the instruments played by the people. First karumbu the wind instrument which is made of paalamaram it

takes 1 to 2 months to make this instrument and urumi and chandai are percussion instruments where made of forest wood with cow skin and every songs are storied like the attams we seen like kozhi attam, kurangattam, thavalai attam are sang in a song form but not uses in the functions only instruments are played in that tune and every song is unique rhythm one to an another in the death ceremony it goes for all night like they use to dance for full night in that night the ancestors of the people use to come inside a random person's body of any kudi and tell they are there for them to protect you. After that, they cook a big feast for the people after the worship of the deceased person. There are some temples in Udumamparai, like Mariamman Temple and a yearly festival for (mariamman) will happen in that kudi in the month of January. Their major occupations are that they are forest dwellers who collect honey, bamboo, herbs and other spices like cardamom, pepper, which are major spices and most things like mara manjal (the turmeric which is taken from the tree). These things are sold in the tribal society centres. To conclude, the Kadar of thepakulamedu and udumamparai are what I visited and experienced the unique cultural things within them, and still they are following in their life even though they are in a struggling situation.



Piliyar statue, Jakkama, mariamman statue, The solar panels are fixed



Figure 5: Things that were kept in the 16th day ceremony

## Mahul Osha in the Chuktia Bhunjia tribe of Western Odisha

*By Sanjib Patel*



Figure 1: Gurumai singing their Bhujia Song



Figure 2: Spirit possesses in the body



Figure 3: Playing the Dhunkel



Figure 4: Collected the Mahua flowers

Chuktia Bhunjia is a particularly vulnerable tribal group (PVTG) of Odisha. They are settled in the Sunabeda Wildlife Sanctuary of Nuapada district of Odisha. Mahul Osha is considered an important festival of the Chuktia Bhunjia culture. Mahul means the flowers of the mahua tree, and osha means festivals. It is celebrated in the month of Chaitra in the Odia Calendar and around March- April according to the English Calendar. In this festival, they worship many Gods and Goddesses in deep of the forest. They scarify a male goat in a sacred place. There is a person called Gurumai, who prays and sings their

bhunjia song the whole night without any book or mobile; this is the blessing of their gods and goddesses. In their song, they prayer different gods and goddesses, and others are playing a musical instrument named Dhunkel. When bhunjia people hear the music and song, some of them become possess with gods and goddesses. This festival is related to the source of income as well as their culture. They believe that when this festival is observed, they collect mahul continuously for nearly 3 months from the forest and sell it in the market.



Figure 5: Temporary settlements in the Forest

## Coming of Age in Samoa and the Present Era

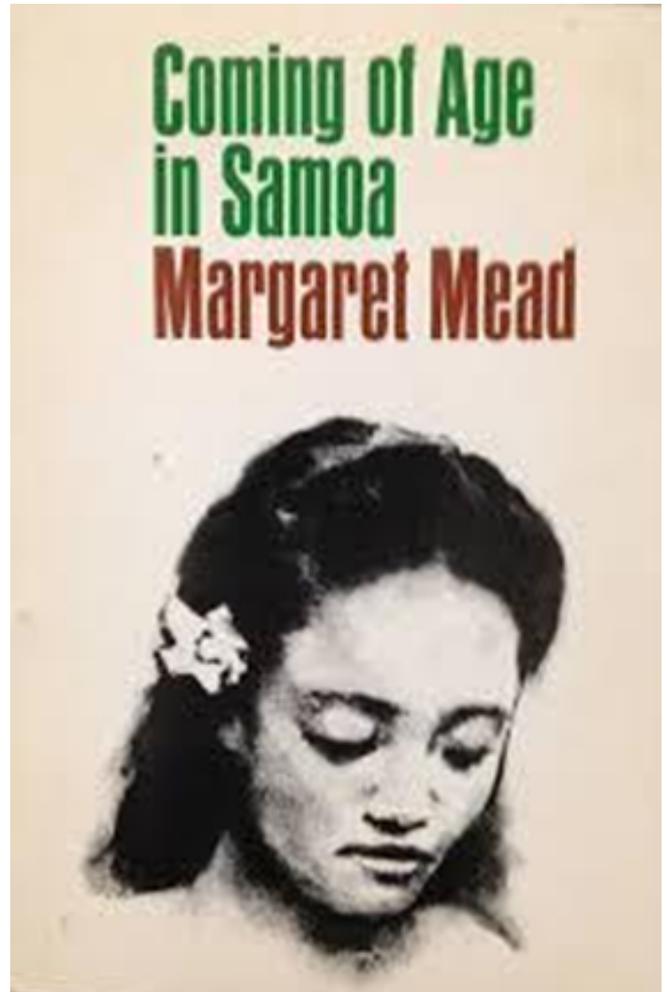


By Poovizhi Thendral Haribaskar

I recently read the book *Coming of Age in Samoa* by Margaret Mead. As a woman, I am always curious to learn about women anthropologists' thoughts in a world of patriarchy. Following that interest, I started to read *Coming of Age in Samoa*. As an anthropological research scholar, this book connects me to looking at Samoa alongside present-day India. *Coming of Age in Samoa* is a book about the psychological differences of adolescents in two different cultures. In Samoa, adolescents are stress-free, whereas Mead mentions that American adolescents are struck with stress and strain. The book consists of fourteen parts; the first eleven parts explain the lifestyle and daily activities of the Samoan people. From these, I understand that Samoans follow an age-set system where responsibility and respect are passed through age rather than specific positions. For example, a mother and an aunt are treated the same, and a grandmother receives more respect than a mother or an aunt simply because of her age; similarly, a distant grandmother is treated the same as a biological grandmother because of her seniority.

In Samoa, the workload is divided according to two categories: age and sex. The taboo between boys and girls starts in childhood, even with their own blood relatives, their brothers and sisters. They have their own groups according to their age and sex. Children from the age of five take on the responsibility of caring for their younger siblings, and their duties change when they reach pre-puberty and start going to the fields; from adolescence, their responsibilities differ again. Here, no one forces them to do things. They wander from one village to another, and people take care of each other. If a child fights with their family, they simply move to a neighbour's home.

Men work hard to attain the title of "Maitai," the chief. Both sexes experience homosexuality; they are curious to know about their desires and needs, and eventually, they end up in marriage, and divorce is not even taboo. In Samoa, there are fewer intense personal relationships, but everyone accepts one another. Death, ceremonies, and sex are normal for children; these are parts of the day-to-day life they pass through.



The central argument of Margaret Mead, made in the book, is "Children must be taught how to think, not what to think." In the present day, knowingly or unknowingly, we take advantage of children as mothers, fathers, or relatives, and we try to impose our thoughts on them. If they do not follow, we start to threaten them. I was born in a village in Tamil Nadu and grew up in one of its cities.

My grandmother had six children and was a school teacher, so her children, including my mother, grew up in neighbours' homes. They played in the sand, made their own toys, and helped with daily work or in the fields. They learned things through a process of "unlearning"; if they did something wrong, an elder would mention it, which helped them correct their

mistakes. Eventually, they also went to school and reached good positions as teachers or engineers, shop owners and so on. Their education was chosen by them, not by their parents; their bond with their parents was built on respect more than simple affection.

However, when placing this scenario in the present world, children are under strict parental control where parents decide what they do. This restricts them from a dynamic view to a linear view; parents are even afraid to leave their children under their own grandmothers. Restriction is not a solution for the problem; what they may face may make them weak. Adult linear worldviews have somehow started to make children the labor of society.

We already decide what our children should be and buy them toys regarding that: if it is a boy, mostly a remote-controlled car or building blocks; for a girl, a teaching set, a doctor set, or a kitchen set. What are we trying to impose on them? As Mead asked: "Will we, who have the knowledge of many ways, leave our children free to choose among them?"

Even though the book was released ninety-eight years ago as a comparative study of America and Samoa, it can still be connected to the present era in any place. I literally travelled into the book, which made me compare my surroundings and my own living experiences.

## REFLECTIONS ON ANTHRO BULLETIN

### **An anthropological reflection on Anindya Sarker and Al Mahmud article on "Ashes and Eternity: The Sacred Theatre of Death and Liberation in Manikarnika Ghat, Banaras"**



*By Sukanya Guha Niyogi*

This paper presents an anthropological reflection on "Ashes and Eternity: The Sacred Theatre of Death and Liberation in Manikarnika Ghat, Banaras" by Anindya Sarker and Al Mahmud in the December 2025 Anthro Bulletin. Drawing upon theories of ritual, liminality, and symbolic interpretation, it examines Manikarnika Ghat as a sacred performative landscape where death is socially organised, ritually enacted, and cosmologically transformed into liberation.

Once, the English author Mark Twain beautifully scripted in his literature about Banaras—"Benaras is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend and looks twice as old as all of them put together". The ancient city Varanasi (Kashi) has long been the premier pilgrimage destination for Hindus. Hindus hold that those who are fortunate enough to pass away in Varanasi will achieve salvation and freedom from the cycle of reincarnation. The great Ganga-front city contains 84 ghats. The majority of the ghats serve as bathing and puja ceremonial spots, whereas two, Manikarnika and Harishchandra, are solely designated for cremation purposes.

Manikarnika Ghat stands not merely as a cremation ground but as one of the most powerful and cultural landscapes of South Asia, where metaphysics, ritual practice, and lived experience converge. Situated on the sacred banks of the Ganga, the ghat embodies an anthropology of death that refuses finality. Here, mortality is not hidden or medicalised, as in many modern societies, but openly performed, ritually

interpreted, and cosmologically integrated into everyday life. Death at Manikarnika is not an interruption of society; it is one of its most meaningful expressions.

From an anthropological perspective, Manikarnika represents what Victor Turner would describe as a liminal zone—a threshold space where ordinary social structures dissolve and individuals move between existential states. The burning pyres mark the passage from embodied life to spiritual release, transforming the corpse from a biological entity into a metaphysical traveller. The ghat thus operates as a ritual bridge between samsara and moksha, where time itself appears suspended between continuity and cessation.

The presence of the goddess Vishalakshi beside the flames of cremation reveals an important philosophical dimension of Hindu thought: destruction is inseparable from creation. Fire, which consumes the body, is simultaneously generative, returning matter to the cosmic elements (pancha mahabhuta). Unlike traditions where death is imagined as impurity, the ritual fire at Manikarnika is sacred. It purifies not only the deceased but the living participants who witness it. This reflects Mary Douglas's insight that purity and pollution are culturally constructed categories. At Manikarnika, death is not pollution; it is a sacred transformation.

The Manikarnika Kund further anchors this cosmology in material form. Water and fire—ordinarily oppositional elements—coexist within the same sacred field. Anthropologically, this coexistence symbolises balance

rather than contradiction. The kund embodies continuity, while the pyre signifies rupture; together they mirror the Hindu conception of cyclical time. The Ganga does not merely flow beside the ghat—it absorbs ash, memory, and karma, carrying them into cosmic circulation. Thus, nature itself becomes an active ritual participant. The ritual process of cremation unfolds through a highly codified sequence of actions: the circumambulation of the pyre, the ignition by the chief mourner, and the chanting of mantras. These acts constitute what Marcel Mauss termed techniques of the body—culturally learned gestures through which societies manage life’s most profound transitions. The mourners’ movements are not spontaneous expressions of grief but disciplined performances shaped by centuries of tradition. Through ritual repetition, personal sorrow is transformed into collective order. Yet Manikarnika is not only a site of theology; it is also a space of lived social reality.

Dom communities who manage the fires, priests who recite mantras, boatmen who wait silently on the river—all participate in a moral economy of death. Their labour reveals how sacredness is sustained through everyday work. Anthropology reminds us that the sacred is not abstract; it is maintained by human hands. Even liberation requires social structure. Equally significant is the presence of genealogical registers preserved near the ghat. These records collapse linear time, connecting

the newly deceased to ancestors centuries old. Through these documents, identity transcends individual biography and becomes lineage memory. In Maurice Halbwachs’ terms, Manikarnika operates as a site of collective memory, where personal grief is absorbed into civilizational continuity. Death does not erase social identity; it repositions it within ancestry. Philosophically, the ghat confronts modern anxieties surrounding mortality. In a world where death is increasingly hidden within hospitals and institutions, Manikarnika insists on visibility. It teaches what existential anthropology recognizes as the human condition: awareness of death is not morbid but necessary for meaningful life. The burning body becomes a mirror for the living, dissolving ego, status, and illusion. Rich and poor alike are reduced to ash. Ultimately, Manikarnika Ghat is less a place of ending than of radical continuity.

The fire consumes form but not essence; the river carries remains but not memory. It is here that Banaras articulates its most enduring philosophy—that death is not negation but passage, not silence but transformation. Through flame, myth, ritual, and remembrance, Manikarnika reveals an anthropology of liberation where the human journey does not conclude but returns, again and again, to the eternal rhythm of existence.



## APPRECIATION FOR ANTHRO BULLETIN

Superb Sunita, many many congratulations 🌸🌸🌸 Well done team AIF 🌟🌟🌟🌟

- Prof Shalina Mehta

Thank you, all seniors n friends, we are trying to put our best efforts, and seek your support.

Sunita with two senior and three interns is able to come with monthly edition, congrats to her efforts, then institution like manav sanghralya with a system should do its duty to share with its stakeholders it's works.

- Prof Amitabh Pande

Colourful and very innovatively designed. Very good articles. One on chhena poda is superb.

Congratulations Sunitha Madam and best wishes always 🌸🌸

- Dr. Khirod Chandra Moharana

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

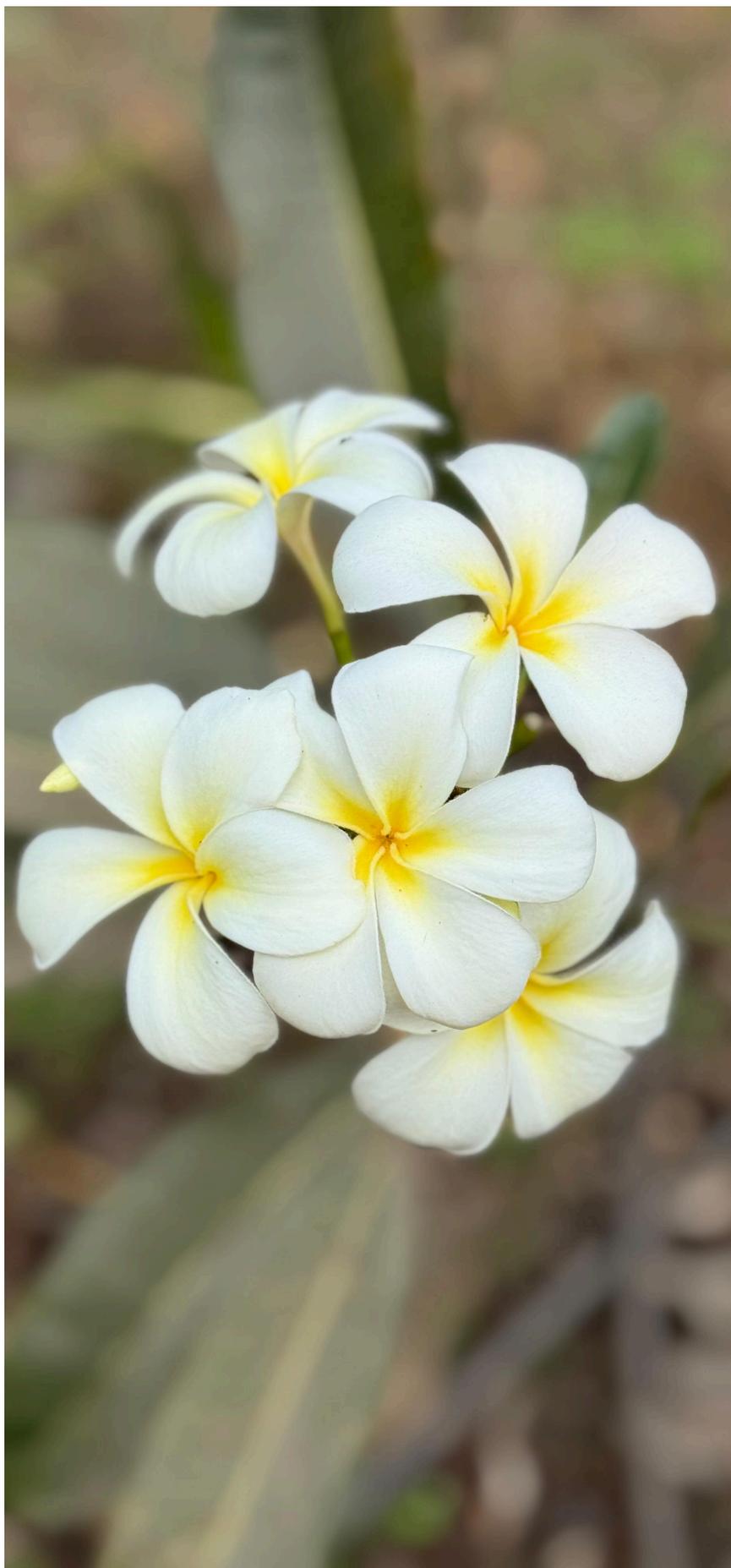
- Prof S.B Roy

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

- Prof PK Misra

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

- Dr Nita Mawar





## FORTHCOMING EVENT

An online lecture will be organised as a part of our Distinguished Guest lecture series. For updates, please follow our website's events page- <https://events.anthroposindiafoundation.com/>

## PAST EVENT

- For our Distinguished Guest lecture series, an online lecture was organised and delivered by **Prof. Anjali D. Khurane** on January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2026 at 6:30 pm onwards

For more details - [Click here](#)

YouTube live Link - [Click here](#)

**DISTINGUISHED GUEST LECTURE**  
Anthropology in Digital Era

**OUR GUEST SPEAKER:** Prof. Anjali D. Khurane

Prof. Dr. Anjali Khurane is a Senior Professor of Anthropology and former head of the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Delhi. She has also served as Director of the School of Human Studies, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, and held several key interdisciplinary and administrative leadership roles. A distinguished sociologist, development and urban anthropologist, she is internationally recognized for her work on child studies, women, caste, ethnicity and social change in India. With over 30 years of teaching, 38 years of research, and 21 years of administrative experience, Prof. Khurane has published and edited books and over 40 research articles, and presented more than 100 papers at national and international conferences. She has received international recognition as a Duff Fellow at Oxford Brookes University, UK and Ghent University, Belgium, and serves on editorial and advisory boards of several journals. Closely associated with international government bodies since 2011, she has played a pivotal role in tribal policy, including authoring India's first handbook on surviving child slavery claims and leading extensive ethnographic research on tribal communities in Maharashtra.

January 29, 2026 | Registration Link | 6:30pm onwards

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Please feel free to share your write-ups, comments and suggestions with us at [aif.newsletter2025@gmail.com](mailto:aif.newsletter2025@gmail.com).

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- PhD Positions in Anthropology in The Social Life of Sexuality, University of Amsterdam  
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