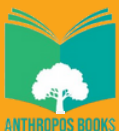


# ANTHRO BULLETIN

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ANTHROPOS INDIA FOUNDATION



A digital magazine that celebrates cultural diversities of India.

## ABOUT ANTHROPOS INDIA FOUNDATION

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

## ABOUT ANTHRO BULLETIN

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

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

All submissions can be emailed to **aif.newsletter2025@gmail.com**.

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Dhuri Saxena, Mehak Vishwakarma, Dr. M. Sarppa Raju.

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## Sacred Ties

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

Growing up in a *Telugu* household, my childhood was steeped in the rhythms of tradition, especially during festivals. My parents celebrated every occasion with deep devotion and a sense of joy that filled our home with energy and purpose. Among the many festivals, *Ugadhi* stood out—not just as the *Telugu* New Year, but as a day for worshipping our ancestors...when the spiritual and the familial came together beautifully.

Every year, *Ugadhi* began early for us. My younger brother and I would accompany our father around the campus, collecting seasonal leaves—tender mangoes and leaves, neem flowers, blooming jasmine, and a variety of fruits. There was something sacred about that morning walk, as if nature itself was preparing for the ritual ahead.

Back at home, my mother would be busy in the kitchen, her hands skillfully crafting a full-course meal infused with love and memory. Among the offerings was the *Ugadhi pachhadi*—a unique blend of six tastes, symbolizing the range of emotions that life brings. Alongside the food, she would lay out a saree, a shirt, and a dhoti in front of the deities—symbolic gifts for our ancestors, lovingly remembered and honoured on this special day.

We children, though hungry from the morning's activity, would fast until the rituals were completed. Only after prayers were offered and the ancestors fed in spirit, would we sit down to eat—meals served on fresh banana leaves, first shared with the divine and the departed.

These moments, rich with meaning and memory,

shaped our understanding of family, faith, and the beauty of continuity. The ancestral worship is a living connection between past and present, spirit and substance, reverence and joy. There is a cosmic connection between us and the spirits.



Ancestral worship is often based on the belief that ancestors continue to exist in a spiritual form after death and can influence the living. They are viewed as spiritual guides or guardians. People may seek their blessings or advice in difficult times, believing that ancestral spirits can offer wisdom or intervene positively in their lives. This creates a spiritual link between the living and the dead, emphasizing continuity of life beyond physical death. It is often accompanied by rituals, offerings, and prayers, which are spiritual acts of respect and communication.

Ancestral worship reinforces a sense of identity, lineage, and belonging—spiritual in the sense that it connects individuals to something larger than themselves: a community, a history, and a shared cosmology.

This bulletin highlights intriguing aspects of ancestral worship, reverence for nature, and reflections on the profound contributions of Rabindranath Tagore and Gautam Buddha. It offers readers a glimpse into the richness of our festivals and spiritual traditions and the great people, who tread the path on our spiritual land.





## Missing Tagore In The Texts Of Indian Anthropology

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

*"When desire blinds the mind with delusion and dust, O thou holy one, thou wakeful, come with thy light and thy thunder."*

(Tagore, *Gitanjali Verse XXXIX*)

Dear Readers,

This editorial is inspired by Ria Ghosh's article titled "Rabindranath Tagore Jayanti: An Anthropological Reflection on the Legacy of a Global Humanist," in this issue of the ***Anthro Bulletin***. As providence would have it, I dealt at length over indifference shown to Tagore's model of education in our education policy reforms beginning 1968, 1986 to NEP-2020 in an unpublished article tentatively titled "Reinventing inclusive and holistic education: Indigenous knowledge systems and the National Education Policy (2020)." His model of education was futuristic, inclusive, and challenged colonial design to produce 'clerks' rather than critical independent thinkers. In his book *Sikshabidhi*, Tagore wrote: Learning was performed in 'borrowed cages' that treated 'the students' minds as captive birds, whose sole value is judged according to mechanical repetition of lessons, prescribed by and educational dispensation foreign to the soil (cf. Seth, 2007:163).

He was the original votary of experiential learning that was aptly summarized by Ranjan Gosh (2017) as a complicated dialectic between education as 'task verb' and 'achievement verb'. For Tagore 'task verb' is far more pertinent than 'achievement verb.' Sadly, later having become the crux of our flawed education pedagogy, Tagore was born on 7th May 1861 (died on 7th August 1941) and the May issue of AIF's ***Anthro Bulletin*** is dedicated to this first non-European Noble laureate who in my opinion is the original architect of 'grounded theory' that is premised on discovery of theory from data in qualitative method research in anthropology and is credited to Glaser and Straus (1967). Tagore's novel *Chokher Bali* (1903) presents a profound understanding of grounded realities of social hierarchies, gendered roles and accompanying oppression and subjugation of women. Narratives in his other novels (*Gora*, 1910; *Noukadubai*, 1906; *Ghare Baire*, 1916) depict lived social realities that masters of post-modernist anthropology and chronicles of ethnography following Geertz's thick description (1973) would be envious of Christine Marsh's (2016) article. Understanding Rabindranath Tagore's spirituality as Deep Ecology, Deep anthropology and Political Theology provides significant insights into imponderabilia of knowledge and vicissitudes embedded in ancient Indian philosophy and in its texts that Tagore explored in his poetry and prose.

What angst me is the fact that the 20th century, Indian

anthropology was institutionalized in the year 1920-21 at Calcutta University that was the birthplace of Tagore, but over hundred years of its existence, it failed to acknowledge Tagore's legacy and erudition in anthropological discourse. In 1901, Tagore had established



experiential school of learning at Shanti Niketan and by 1921, it had become Visva-Bharati University. Contemporality of two institutions is not only historically significant but is critical to comprehend how ideological pathways and autonomy in decision making defined their distinctive trajectories. In Sanjay Gosh's (2017:15,16) words: Tagore's philosophy had 'organized complexity' built into it. It embraces several elements interwoven together and represents 'ethics of non-linearity'- "(in) fusion-transcultural now" that explores critical thinking beyond polarities and binaries and examines multipolarity in paradigms, epistemologies and learning methodologies.

Above citation summates the context and content of contemporary anthropological theory that continues to draw its reference from western discourse and writings, oblivious to more than a century old Tagore's philosophy and practise. My generation and genre of anthropology we practised, spent hours eulogising Marx, Weber, Geertz, Levi Strauss, Foucault, and scores of others but never ever discussed significance of Tagore's philosophy and methodology in doing ethnography. Even Anthropology department at Calcutta University failed to capture potency of his phenomenal insights in comprehending lived realities of social life. The department surrendered to the hegemony of western science under the leadership of eminent anthropologist L.K Anantakrishnan Iyer. He remained chairperson of the first department of anthropology from 1921-1932. Those were challenging times in which conformance to colonial expectations for data generation was probably a safer choice for survival. Decades were spent pursuing ethnological studies documenting and classifying populations in prejudicial racial categories. Occasional exceptional empirical studies like Tarak Chandra Das's work on Bengal famine and the one on the Municipal workers of Kolkata by K.P. Chattopadhyay and Gautam Sankar Ray broke the clutches but largely remained unsung and unrecognised. The discipline was not able to evolve an independent philosophy, manifesting human empathy, and relevance for society that Rabindranath Tagore was documenting so vividly. Tagore, with his extensive exposure to the west and western philosophy was able to merge Swadeshi with the Videshi to evolve an independent school of thought that mainstream anthropology remained

devoid of. It focused on collecting local data and kept analysing it in alien metaphors. I may be wrong, but limited access that I had to the past anthropological texts published from 1921 to the end of the century, I was not able to locate a single manuscript by any of our stalwart's, discussing affinity between Tagore's philosophy and anthropological theory. It was heartening to see that in the last two decades some young researchers have rediscovered Tagore and propensity of his contributions to anthropological epistemology and methodology. I mentioned Ria Gosh's article in the present bulletin and Christine Marsh's brilliant exposition of his contributions to anthropological discourse. There is another interesting title An Anthropological study of Tagore's *Chokker Bali* by Astha Singh (IJRAW:2024; 3 (4):137-142) that should make an interesting read. I must confess to be pedantic but

as I grow older, I am inundated by our failure to give to the world an independent anthropological theory that emanated from the world view of farsighted intellectuals of the 20th century. Tagore decidedly stands out but some day we must also explore anthropological contours and embedded ethnography theory in the writings of Munshi Premchand, Mahadevi Verma, and scores of their contemporaries to mark antecedents of independent Indian anthropology.

1. Clifford Geertz (1973:315) in his frequently cited book *Thick Description: Towards an Interpretative theory of culture* wrote: culture is public because meaning is; an inference that Tagore's writings manifested from the beginning of the 20th century.

## ARTICLE 1

### ANCESTOR WORSHIP OF PANBARI VILLAGE OF ASSAM



by Dr.Luna Goswami

Religion finds an important place in human society since the human mind searches for a supreme identity to express their awe and reverence in times of crucial moments of life's journey. At the beginning, there was the concept of animism, i.e, the belief in the possession of the supreme power in some inanimate and animate objects, and they tried to appease these powers through many beliefs and practices. Anthropologists like Tylor and Frazer have developed theories about the origin and development of religion. Every society has its belief system regarding the supernatural world, which finds expression in its rites and rituals. Ancestor worship is a practice to show obeisance to the souls for their eternal peace and to obtain blessings in return. Such practices are common to all societies, revealing the power and beliefs in the souls. The associated belief is that the nonperformance of rituals and practices may bring evil to family members.

In Assam, there are various caste groups, but one can notice such beliefs and practices in almost all caste groups. Such a practice is noticed among the Brahmins of Panbari village of Bajali district, situated in the western part of Assam. The people belonging to the same lineage offer *srradha* (rituals for the dead) ceremony to their previous ancestors communally every year.

The family members living apart or in different areas from rural, urban or cities, take part in the occasion. Donations are given according to one's wish as it is not a mandatory amount, and the affluent person of the lineage are also seen to donate wholeheartedly in the name of their ancestors. People gather together in a common place of the village, as in an agricultural land or any of the intending households of the lineage. The *srradha* ceremony is conducted according to the *Vedic* rules and regulations. The male members, likely the senior members, perform the rituals with the help of a *purohit* (priest). The completion of the rituals takes almost two or three hours, and after the completion, a feast is held among the family members, which brings joy and delight to the family members and binds them in a strong and everlasting kinship bond. The neighbouring people belonging to different caste groups are also invited for the occasion, which reflects the inter caste relationship in the village. Even merrymaking such as songs and dances, also take place after the completion of the main rituals and feast.

Thus, such ceremonies or rituals not only appease the souls but also cultivate an eternal bonding among the family members, which is much fulfilling and indeed an enduring one.



*Sradha* ceremony through *Vedic* principles (ancestor worship)



Cultural programme among the paternal kins.

## The Light of Compassion: Observing Buddha Purnima in Contemporary Karnataka (India)

by Ms. Renuka Moropantar

**Introduction:** *Buddha Purnima*, also known as *Vesak*, is celebrated on the full moon day of *Vaishakha*, marking the birth, enlightenment, and *Mahaparinirvana* (death) of Gautama Buddha. While this day is widely celebrated in regions with significant Buddhist populations such as Sikkim, Ladakh, and Bihar, the observance in Karnataka holds a unique charm, blending local traditions with Buddhist teachings. The day encourages reflection, peace, devotion, and a return to core values like nonviolence, compassion, and mindfulness, offering a powerful antidote to the materialism that increasingly dominates the world today.

### Short Biography of Gautama Buddha:

- **Birth:** Born as Siddhartha in 563 BCE in Lumbini (modern-day Nepal).
- **Parents:** Son of King Suddhodana and Queen Maya from the Shakya clan.
- **Royal Life:** Lived a life of luxury within three seasonal palaces.
- **Prophecy:** Sage Asita predicted that Siddhartha would either become a great king or a spiritual teacher.
- **Marriage:** Married his cousin Yashodhara at the age of 16, and they had a son, Rahula.
- **The Four Sights:** At age 29, Siddhartha witnessed an old man, a sick man, a dead body, and an ascetic—what he later called the Four Heavenly Messengers.
- **Renunciation:** At 29, he left his royal life in search of spiritual truth (the Great Renunciation).
- **Meditation:** Practised penance and meditation under the Bodhi Tree at Bodh Gaya.
- **Enlightenment:** Attained enlightenment, becoming Gautama Buddha, “The Enlightened One.”
- **Teachings:**
  - Four Noble Truths
  - Eightfold Path (*Ashtanga Marga*)
  - Emphasized truth, non-violence, simplicity, and celibacy.
- **Symbols:**
  - Birth:** Lotus
  - Renunciation:** Horse (*Kanthaka*)
  - Penance:** Bodhi Tree
  - First Sermon:** *Dharmachakra* (Wheel of Dharma)
  - Death:** Stupas
  - Death:** Passed away at Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh, at the age of 80, achieving *Mahaparinirvana* in 483 BCE.

**Historical and Cultural Context:** Buddhism emerged in India during the 6th century BCE, developing as a profound philosophical and social movement. *Buddha Purnima* commemorates significant events in Gautama

Buddha’s life—his birth, enlightenment, and death—focusing on values like compassion, humility, and self-awareness rather than grandeur. The observance of this day highlights the internal transformation of individuals, as it encourages introspection, meditation, and ethical living.

*Buddha Purnima* is not only a religious observance but also a cultural practice that underscores peace, equality, and introspection. The minimalist nature of the festival contrasts with the external rituals of other celebrations, emphasizing internal practices like charity, meditation, and reflection on the Five Precepts and the Eightfold Path.

Karnataka holds historical significance for Buddhism, as ancient stupas and inscriptions in places like Gulbarga, Banavasi, and Sannati indicate a deep Buddhist heritage. Additionally, regions like Bylakuppe host Tibetan settlements, and Buddhist communities, influenced by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s *Navayana* movement, contribute to a fusion of Buddhist philosophy with local traditions, shaping contemporary celebrations of *Buddha Purnima*.





**Buddha Vihara (Kalaburagi, Karnataka):** The *Buddha Vihara* in Kalaburagi stands as one of the largest Buddhist monuments in South India. Built with the support of Gulbarga University and the Siddhartha Vihar Trust, this *Vihara* spans 70 acres and costs more than ₹8 crore. Its architectural design, influenced by the Ajanta and Ellora caves, features intricately carved *Buddha* statues. A notable highlight is the six-foot-tall black stone *Buddha* statue sculpted by Ashok Gudikar.

This *Vihara* is not only an architectural marvel but also serves as a center for meditation, spiritual learning, and reflection. It has become a cultural landmark, offering a space for spiritual seekers and followers of *Buddha's* teachings.

**Observing Buddha Purnima - A Field Experience from Karnataka:** In Karnataka, *Buddha Purnima* is observed with a blend of simplicity and profound meaning. In cities like Kalaburagi, Vijayapura, and Mysuru, particularly among Ambedkarite Buddhist communities, the celebrations embody communal harmony and spiritual unity. At community centers in Kalaburagi, the *Buddha* idol is bathed in water as a symbol of purification. Floral garlands, incense, and candles adorn the statue, while monks chant verses from the *Dhammapada*. Devotees engage in meditation and collective chanting of the *Triratna—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha*.

The celebrations emphasize a communal spirit. Volunteers distribute fruits, water, and pamphlets explaining the Five Precepts and the Eightfold Path. Children recite peace poems, while elders share stories from *Buddha's* life. The atmosphere is marked by inclusiveness, where caste divisions dissolve, and everyone participates in the shared meal, embodying Buddhist principles of equality and unity.

**Voices from the Community:** Conversations with local practitioners highlight the significance of *Buddha Purnima*. Ms. Suma Doddamani, a schoolteacher and Buddhist devotee, shares: “*Buddha Purnima* is a reaffirmation of our commitment to live by his teachings—especially compassion (*karuna*) and loving-kindness (*maitri*).”

Lingaraju, a young college student, adds: “This day teaches us that true enlightenment comes not from rituals, but from awareness, meditation, and service.”

In the modern digital age, social media platforms have become avenues for followers to share *Buddha's* teachings, conduct virtual *satsangs*, and organize online charity drives, blending traditional practices with modern technology.

**Anthropological Reflections:** From an anthropological standpoint, *Buddha Purnima* serves as a cultural mechanism reinforcing collective memory, ethical living, and socio-spiritual values. The festival transcends regional boundaries, uniting diverse Buddhist traditions under a shared moral vision of peace, mindfulness, and compassion.

The practice of *dāna* (charity) is central to the observance, with followers donating food, books, and clothes to the needy. The minimalist celebration, resisting consumerism, emphasizes contentment, simplicity, and service to others. *Buddha Purnima* is not confined to Buddhist communities alone. People from various religions partake in peace marches, art exhibitions on *Buddha's* life, and discussions on mindfulness, highlighting the universal appeal of Buddhist values in a pluralistic society like India.

**Conclusion:** *Buddha Purnima* radiates the message of inner awakening, shared humanity, and ethical consciousness. It invites reflection on the importance of stillness in a noisy world, compassion in a divided society, and mindfulness in our daily lives. Whether celebrated in grand monasteries or modest community halls, the essence remains the same—the pursuit of wisdom, virtue, and peace. In today's world, marked by stress and conflict, *Buddha Purnima* offers a timely reminder of the path of simplicity, empathy, and self-awareness. As the chants rise under the full moon, they echo the timeless values that continue to guide humanity, transcending the bounds of time and place.



Photos of Buddha Vihar Kalaburagi, Karnataka.

## Rabindranath Tagore Jayanti: An Anthropological Reflection on the Legacy of a Global Humanist



by Ria Ghosh

Every year, on the 25th day of the Bengali month of *Boishakh*, communities across India and Bangladesh gather to celebrate Rabindranath Tagore *Jayanti*, commemorating the birth of one of South Asia's most complex and enduring cultural figures. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)-poet, philosopher, educator, composer, and social reformer was more than a literary genius; he was a cultural anthropologist in his own right, whose life and works offer deep insights into the intersections of tradition, modernity, colonialism, and cosmopolitan humanism. This article explores Tagore's birth anniversary not merely as a festive event but as an annual ritual of cultural remembrance, an anthropological window into how collective identity, transnationalism, and cultural memory are shaped and transmitted.

### The Early Milieu: Tagore in Context

Tagore was born into the Tagore family of Jorasanko, Kolkata - a lineage deeply embedded in the socio-religious reform movements of 19th-century Bengal. The Tagores were major proponents of the Bengal Renaissance, a cultural and intellectual awakening that emerged under the simultaneous influence of colonial modernity and indigenous reformism. Raised in a household where literature, music, philosophy, and political thought flourished, Tagore's upbringing blurred the boundaries between East and West, sacred and secular. He was educated outside of conventional systems, nurtured instead by tutors and personal explorations. Later travels to England would expose him to European thought, but his creative center remained grounded in Indian traditions-especially *Upanishadic* spirituality and *Bhakti* philosophy. Anthropologically, this hybridity - this continual dialogue between the local and the global became the crucible from which his unique worldview emerged.

### Cultural Production and Civilizational Dialogue

Tagore's cultural output is staggering. He wrote over 2,000 songs (*Rabindra Sangeet*), numerous plays, short stories, and novels, and even produced paintings and essays on philosophy and politics. His 1913 Nobel Prize for *Gitanjali* marked a symbolic moment when Indian literary sensibilities were globally acknowledged on Western terms. But Tagore was not content with passive cultural export. He saw the arts as vehicles of cultural renewal and as tools to challenge both colonial domination and indigenous stagnation.

His plays and fiction often wrestled with themes of caste, gender roles, nationalism, and the psychological effects of colonization. For anthropologists, Tagore's works function like ethnographic narratives. In stories like *Kabuliwala* or *The Postmaster*, he maps human emotions onto cultural landscapes, giving voice to marginalized experiences while also critiquing dominant social norms.

### Visva-Bharati: An Experiment in Cultural Anthropology

Perhaps Tagore's most significant anthropological endeavor was the founding of Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan in 1921. Designed as an ashram-like learning environment, Visva-Bharati was a rejection of rote colonial education and an embrace of holistic, intercultural learning. The institution welcomed students and scholars from across Asia, Europe, and Africa, predating today's discourse on decolonial education by nearly a century. Here, Tagore practiced what might be described as applied anthropology-encouraging the study of rural life, folk traditions, and agrarian economies. His later establishment of Sriniketan, a rural reconstruction center, integrated learning with community engagement and craft traditions, echoing today's models of participatory development and ethnographic praxis.

### Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Identity

Tagore's relationship with nationalism was famously ambivalent. While he supported India's freedom struggle, he consistently critiqued narrow forms of nationalism that prioritized territorial identity over ethical universality. His repudiation of British knighthood in protest against the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919 was a moral act rooted in a vision of universal man- a concept he explored in his essay *Nationalism* and elsewhere. From an anthropological perspective, Tagore's vision aligns with cosmopolitan anthropology - the idea that human belonging transcends borders and that culture is always hybrid, dialogic, and evolving. In a world now grappling with ethno-nationalism and xenophobia, Tagore's voice remains one of profound relevance.

### Tagore Jayanti as a Cultural Ritual

The observance of Tagore *Jayanti* is itself a rich site for anthropological inquiry. In Santiniketan, students and devotees mark the day with recitations, songs, and



dramatizations of Tagore's works. The rituals are aesthetic yet pedagogical, devotional yet secular. In Kolkata, Dhaka, and among diasporic Bengali communities, similar events unfold in schools, cultural halls, and homes. These commemorations function as what anthropologist Victor Turner would call *communitas*-a temporary suspension of social divisions through shared cultural performance. They also constitute a form of cultural reproduction, passing Tagore's ethos to younger generations through embodied, performative memory. Tagore Jayanti also reveals the tension between state-sponsored nationalism and vernacular, regional pride. While the Indian state honors Tagore as the composer of the national anthem and a pan-Indian figure, for many Bengalis, he remains a *bhadralok* (refined gentleman) symbol-deeply rooted in Bengali identity and linguistic heritage.

### Gender, Ecology, and the Subaltern

Tagore's treatment of gender and ecology also merits attention. Though shaped by his time, many of his female characters-like *Binodini* in *Chokher Bali* or *Bimala* in *The Home and the World*-grapple with agency, desire, and autonomy in ways that were radical for early 20th-century Indian literature. Ecologically, Tagore's writings are infused with a reverence for nature. His poems, particularly in *Sanchayita*, reflect an ecological sensibility that aligns with current discourses in environmental anthropology. His belief in nature as teacher, healer, and muse remains embedded in the pedagogical ethos of Santiniketan.

### A Legacy Beyond Borders

Tagore's cultural legacy is not confined to India or even South Asia. He influenced thinkers such as W.B. Yeats, Romain Rolland, and Albert Einstein. In China and Japan, his visits helped shape pan-Asian intellectual solidarity. In the Caribbean and Africa, his critiques of imperialism resonated with anti-colonial movements. His dual authorship of the Indian and Bangladeshi national anthems-*Jana Gana Mana* and *Amar Shonar Bangla*, respectively-underscores his transnational imprint. Few cultural figures embody the dualities of rootedness and universality as seamlessly as Tagore.

### Conclusion

To commemorate Rabindranath Tagore *Jayanti* is not simply to celebrate a poet's birthday-it is to enter a layered space of cultural memory, ethical reflection, and identity negotiation. Through an anthropological lens, Tagore emerges not just as an artist but as a cultural theorist, educator, and visionary whose life and work invite us to reimagine community, creativity, and coexistence. In an era marked by ecological crises, political polarization, and cultural fragmentation, Tagore's vision of interconnectedness and human dignity offers not merely nostalgia but guidance. As we mark *Ponchishe Boishakh* each year, we are not only honoring the past-we are dialoguing with a future Tagore dreamed of: one of harmony, empathy, and endless creativity.





## Resurrection from the Obsolete



By Dr. Kamal Kant Misra

In its 15 March 2025 edition, The Hindu published an article titled, "What Makes a Tribe? Top Anthropologists Argue for a Spectrum Over Binary Classification." In this thought-provoking piece, leading anthropologists critique the existing five-point criteria used to define a Scheduled Tribe in India, denouncing them as "condescending," "obsolete," "derogatory," and "meaningless." They argue that given India's immense cultural diversity, these criteria might need to expand to 150 points to better encapsulate the nuanced realities of tribal identity. I see this development as nothing short of a "resurrection from the obsolete"—a debate that has resurfaced time and again in Indian anthropology, only to fade without resolution. This attempt of revival compels me to ponder: is there a significant yet universal criterion that could, from an anthropological perspective, distinguish indigenous communities from other communities across the globe?

As fate would have it, I am currently travelling through the southeastern United States, immersing myself in old books, news reports, and travel diaries that recount the histories of the *Creek*, *Cherokee*, *Choctaw*, and other Native American tribes that once flourished in this region. My extensive research with various Indian tribes and very limited reading of other tribes across the globe has led me to draw striking cultural parallels between these indigenous communities, past and present. What stands out most profoundly is their deep, intrinsic connection to nature—a bond that has shaped their traditions, beliefs, and ways of life across centuries.

Let me illustrate this with two examples: one from the USA and the other from India, as revealed by the tribes themselves. Inculcating the value of human-nature inseparability has been a part of their process of socialization. The parents and grandparents thus tell stories to their grandchildren, explaining the deep bonding between humans and nature. Russell Means, a former chief of the Oglala Lakota Nation from South Dakota of the USA, corroborates this by saying: "Before I was six years old, my grandparents and my mother had taught me that if all the green things that grow were taken from the earth, there could be no life. If all the four-legged creatures were taken from the earth, there could be no life. If all the winged creatures

were taken from the earth, there could be no life. If all our relatives who crawl and swim and live within the earth were taken away, there could be no life. But if all the human beings were taken away, life on Earth would flourish. That is how insignificant we are."

(<https://silvotherapy.co.uk/articles/nature-connection-native-americans/>).

Another story of life's journey comes from Natthu Maroti Gawade, thirty-four years old, a resident of Kothri village, Bharbhidi post, Chamorshi Taluk, Gadchiroli district, Maharashtra, India, belonging to the *Madia Adivasi* community. Natthu continues: "In our culture, our elders teach us to respect and love nature from early childhood. Our traditional rituals are the way we introduce young children to respecting and pledging loyalty to forests and nature. Our culture, traditions, customs, and values are designed to maintain balance with the environment and live in harmony with nature. For instance, the rituals devoted to our supreme deity, *Pheda phen*, introduce the child to worshipping nature from early on. *Pheda phen* is worshipped in the form of an tree, as we Madia call it, also known as *Terminalia tomentosa*, ... and locally called as *asan*." (<https://terralingua.org/stories/nature-is-our-culture/>).

Natthu thus concludes by asserting that "Mainstream scholars and practitioners say that indigenous cultures are closely associated with nature, but I would say that nature is our culture. We cannot differentiate nature from our culture; for us, they are one and the same." (Ibid.).

In these fraught times of ecological uncertainty, it becomes imperative to honor both our scientists—our modern-day sages—who strive to safeguard the planet, and indigenous and tribal communities, whose traditions remain deeply entwined with nature's sanctity. Their way of life, steeped in reverence for the natural world, offers profound insights into sustainable coexistence. Acknowledging this, we must foreground the problematic identity of indigenous communities, including the Indian *Adivasis*, by recognizing their intrinsic bond with nature. While culture is often understood by its capacity for change, as perceived by Sapir, Geertz, Herskovits and others, echoes of this timeless value still endure in some form or the other, steadfast among many indigenous peoples across the globe.

## Prof. Subhadra Mitra Channa



*Interview by Saba Farhin*

Prof. Subhadra Mitra Channa is a distinguished anthropologist and retired Professor of Anthropology from the University of Delhi. With an academic career spanning over four decades, she has made seminal contributions to the fields of gender studies, cosmology, marginalization, identity, urban anthropology, and inequality. Her work is characterized by a deep commitment to understanding and voicing the experiences of marginalized communities in India.

Prof. Channa's scholarly oeuvre includes twelve authored and edited books and over eighty research papers, many of which are widely cited and used in teaching curricula. Notable among her publications are 'Gender in South Asia' (Cambridge University Press), 'The Inner and Outer Selves' and 'The Dhobis of Delhi: An Ethnography from the Margins' (Oxford University Press), 'Life as a Dalit' (Sage), and two edited volumes with Routledge - 'Religious Pluralism in India' and 'Colonial Anthropology: Technologies and Discourses of Dominance.' Her writing combines theoretical rigor with rich ethnographic insight.

She has held numerous prestigious academic positions, including serving as the Senior Vice President of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES). She has also been honored with two Fulbright Teaching Fellowships, a Charles Wallace Fellowship, and several visiting professorships abroad. In recognition of her excellence in teaching, the University of Delhi awarded her the Distinguished Teacher Award.

Currently, Prof. Channa continues to contribute to the discipline as the Co-Editor of the journal - *Reviews in Anthropology*. Through her teaching, mentorship, and prolific scholarship, she has left a lasting impact on the field of anthropology both in India and internationally.

In this conversation with Prof. Subhadra Mitra Channa, we explore her academic journey, landmark contributions to the discipline, and her reflections on the evolving landscape of anthropology in India.

**Looking back at your academic journey, what initially inspired you to pursue anthropology, and how did your early experiences shape your research interests over time?**

I've had a long academic journey, with research interests that have evolved gradually over time. As a bright student in the 1970s, the norm was for high achievers to pursue science like medicine or physics. I initially wanted to study medicine, but my mother discouraged it, concerned about the



challenges women faced in the profession, such as night duties. As a result, I pursued physics, though I was always more drawn to reading and writing. Physics felt dry to me, and after completing my graduation, I decided not to continue.

It was my father, a passionate reader with an extensive library, who introduced me to anthropology through books by early thinkers like E. B. Tylor and J. G. Frazer. I found the subject fascinating and enrolled in the program, falling in love with it from the first day. Despite coming from a science background, I topped my first semester and went on to earn multiple fellowships.

During my student years, I noticed that even as a top performer, I was often overlooked compared to my male peers. The department was male-dominated, and senior faculty were almost exclusively men. Around the same time, gender-focused literature by scholars like Michelle Rosaldo began emerging, which deeply influenced me. Although my PhD was in economic anthropology, since gender studies didn't yet exist, I studied a working-class caste, the dhobis, focusing on household budgets, occupational mobility, kinship, marriage etc. My ethnographic fieldwork often brought me into closer contact with women, which shaped my perspective on gender, even if it wasn't part of my formal research then.

Later, as a faculty member, I developed one of the first gender and anthropology courses in India, which I taught until retirement. I also authored 'Gender in South Asia' (Cambridge University Press), which gained international recognition. My interest extended beyond gender to cosmology, religion, and the environment. I was among the first faculty involved in establishing the School of Environmental Studies at Delhi University and continued teaching there till my retirement.

Post-retirement, free from administrative duties, I've become even more academically active. My most recent book, 'The Dhobis of Delhi' (Oxford University Press), builds on my PhD and long-term engagement with this Delhi-based community. Over the decades, I maintained close ties with them, sharing meals, observing transformations in their homes and occupations, allowing me to conduct a rare longitudinal ethnography that has received significant attention. In fact, a recent Sunday feature article focused on the book and my journey. It was based on an interview much like this one, with similar questions about how the project came to be.

I've also engaged in archival research. With my colleague Lancey Lobo, I co-authored books on 'Religious Pluralism in India' and 'Colonial Anthropology,' both published by Routledge. Our third collaboration, 'Sacred Ecology,' is currently in press. Additionally, I've co-authored a forthcoming book on the internet with a student.

Today, I continue my academic work as the editor of Reviews in Anthropology and remain engaged in international scholarship through my previous roles as Chair and Senior Vice President of the IUAES.

**Your work has deeply engaged with themes of marginalization, gender, and ecological change. Which of your research contributions do you consider most significant, and why?**

In Indian anthropology, very few scholars initially focused on gender. After I began writing on the subject, younger scholars gradually took it up. My book 'Gender in South Asia,' published by Cambridge University Press, received significant international attention. I was also part of global academic networks working on marginalization, race, and gender, contributing to international publications, conferences, and edited volumes.

Urban anthropology was another area I explored early on. While scholars like R.S. Khare and others had worked in the field, I focused on caste and untouchability in urban settings. During my master's, I was deeply influenced by Joan Mencher's 1974 paper "The Caste System Upside Down" in Current Anthropology. Later, Joan and I became close collaborators and co-edited 'Life as a Dalit,' a collection of writings by Dalit anthropologists and writers from across India. That book, too, has been widely recognized.

These themes continue to shape my current work. I'm developing theoretical insights on the conceptualization of the body, recently contributing a chapter to the 'Cambridge Handbook of Gender and Sexuality' that explores indigenous perspectives. In both this work and my book on the dhobis, I challenge Western dichotomies like mind-body dualism by drawing on Indian textual traditions, which offer more integrated

views of the self.

My current research increasingly incorporates Indian philosophical texts to enrich anthropological theory and deepen understanding of embodiment from non-Western standpoints.

**As someone who has seen the discipline evolve over decades, how do you view the current state of anthropology in India and its relevance in addressing contemporary social challenges?**

Yes, I believe anthropology in India is progressing well. In both biological and cultural anthropology, we're seeing many promising young students emerge. A particularly positive development is the increasing participation of scholars from tribal and marginalized communities, many of whom were once the subjects of study and are now teachers and researchers themselves. Some of my former students, who come from these communities, are now teaching and making significant contributions to the field.

This shift is very encouraging. Historically, Europeans studied Indians and caste; now, we are reclaiming that narrative and examining caste from our perspectives. For instance, in my work on the dhobis, I've tried to present their view of caste. When someone from a dhobi or tribal background becomes a scholar, their lived experience enriches the academic discourse in a way outsiders cannot replicate.

We're also seeing increased diversity in gender, sexuality, and social background among students and young faculty, which brings fresh and varied perspectives into research. I strongly believe departments should actively support and encourage scholars from marginalized communities to teach and conduct research. Knowledge production needs to be decentralized.

It's inspiring to see *Naga* and other northeastern scholars publishing critical, self-reflective works that challenge earlier representations. This shift from top-down to more community-led knowledge is a very positive direction for Indian anthropology.

**What advice would you offer to young and aspiring anthropologists, especially those seeking to make meaningful contributions to both academia and society?**

I always told my students not to follow trends blindly. Many would come to me saying a topic is currently "hot" and they want to work on it. I would ask, "Do you truly love this topic? Do you feel a deep, personal urge to explore it?" If the answer was no, I'd encourage them to pursue the area they genuinely cared about. You can only excel when your work comes from within, when it's something you deeply feel.

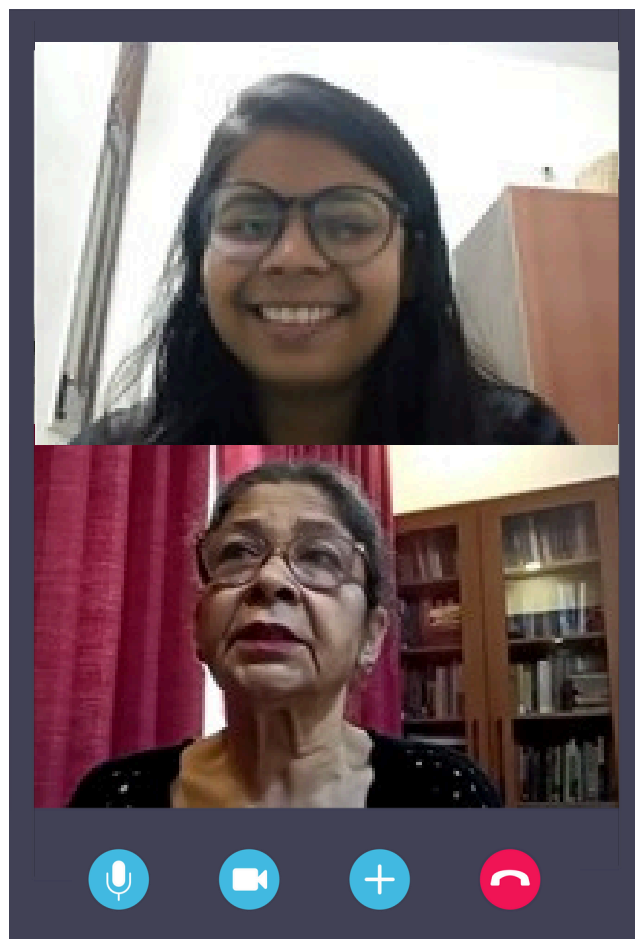


In my research, especially internationally, people have noted that my work is heartfelt. That authenticity makes a difference, even theoretically. If you're not genuinely interested, say in gender or marginality, but still pursue it for appearances, the work will lack depth and meaning. I've seen such cases, and the results are poor.

Not everyone has to work on gender or marginality. If you're passionate about corporate culture, pursue the anthropology of corporates. What matters is emotional investment. For example, I care deeply about the environment, not just academically, but in my daily life. I avoid plastic, conserve water, and segregate waste because it matters to me. That genuine commitment feeds into my academic work.

Passion fuels productivity! I've seen friends who, as African Americans, channel their experiences of racism into powerful, impactful academic work. Others from marginalized identities do the same. Their passion drives excellence.

This is my advice: be passionate. Without passion and personal connection, you'll never produce meaningful work or stand out academically. Passion turns effort into impact and mediocrity into excellence.



## A Glimpse of Chhau Dance Mask- making Village- Charida, West Bengal



By Sukanya Guha Niyogi

Mask dance has a special attraction in the Indian cultural profile, especially which represents the unique admixture of religious life, artistic expressions, along with hardcore physical activity like martial arts in different indigenous communities from South India to East and North-East India. Some famous mask dances across India are *Chhau* dance (a traditional dance form, an admixture of Martial arts and religious folktales) from Eastern India (Jharkhand, West Bengal, Orissa), Gambhira from North Bengal, Bohada from Maharashtra, and Theyyam dance from Kerala. This vibrant and dynamic *Chhau* Dance of Eastern India are performed by the local community of Purulia district of West Bengal, Seraikela of Jharkhand and Mayurbhanj of Orissa. These masks are not merely used as material props for the performance but also help establish a visual language of dance to embodiment of religious characters. The masks depict specific mythological characters- Gods, Goddesses, heroes, demons, animals. In Purulia, Charida is well known for *Chhau* Dance mask-making village, where almost 300 villagers belong to the *Sutradhar* community and their main socio-economic activity is mask production and selling. In the year 2010, this *Chhau* dance mask was recognised as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. In my fieldwork days in Baghmundi, I had an opportunity to visit that village and observe closely the *Chhau* Mask making culture.

### From my field diary

In the month of October, I was travelling by bus from Baghmundi town to Balarampur town for my fieldwork with *Birhors*. Suddenly, I came across the Charida village and I saw lines of *Chhau* mask shops on both sides of the main roads where different shapes and forms of *Chhau* masks hanging to showcase and to sell. Then I decided to come to this place again to observe the majestic mask-making procedure. When I went to my field again in the last week of January after my regular fieldwork was completed, I took a bus and reached the village. After arriving, I saw lines of shops preparing masks. I entered one of the shops to see the masks closely in terms of size, materials, and their prices. First, I was silently observing that the shopkeeper was drawing the eyes of masks. When I asked about the masks, he said, "This is our age-old craft. I am a third-generation mask maker, doing this craft from generation to generation. We have special expertise in this artwork. People from outside, like Kolkata and different parts of Bengal, used to come to visit as one of the tourist places of Purulia, sometimes they buy masks as a memento of Purulia". The shops display different sizes of masks of different Hindu religious characters - *Durga*, *Ganesh*, *Kartik*, *Kali*, *Mahishasur*, *Krishna*, *Shiva* and contemporary trending

models like *Buddha*, *Kathakali* dance mask, *Nazar Kati*, a *Santali* family. After that, I took a small street where I saw masks being made from scratch in a workshop. Before entering the workshop, I noticed that the clay framework was kept under the sun to dry up near a hearth. As I entered, there were two sections of mask makers, one unit of experienced, aged artisans was preparing mask frames and engaging in the layering process of making and another unit was dedicated to decoration by young artisans. I started the conversation about the mask making process from frame making to selling with an aged artisans, with clay knife, called *Thapi* in one hand and clay frame in other hand while shaping the frame, he described as "mask making is a tedious and time taking process, you have to know drying, shaping the clay models, different layering process and use of the decorative materials aesthetically." According to his description, firstly we have to make a clay mould of each specific mask by cutting and scraping with a wooden strip called *Chiyadi*, then the clay mould is kept under the sun or fire to dry first. After drying the clay, the layer of soft papers- usually newspapers, old school books and notebooks- are pasted meticulously with diluted glue, which is made from wheat flour beforehand. After the first paper layering, again the mask has to be kept under the sun to dry for two to three days, then the clay mould is removed carefully, and one layer of cotton cloth is pasted on the paper structure and again left to dry for two to three days. After the cloth dries, a thin layer of liquid clay is applied and kept under the sun to make the face smooth and seamless. Now, different colors, specifically fabric colors are applied on the mask as per the mythological character with intricate details of curvy arched eyes and a broad mustache, showing big teeth and an angry nose. After this, the mask is placed to a frame to proceed the further decoration. The frame plays as a back support for heavy beads, thermocol, and plastic made golden and silver sequins and feathers with the mask. The face of the mask is attached to the frame and sticks every bead and golden, silver and colorful sequins material in fashion. After joining every line, feathers are attached at the broader of the frame.



Fully decorated with a Chhau Mask of Mahishasura



This mask-making craft is the familial occupation in Charida Village, men are typically involved in the mask-making craft, and women work as crafting assistants and sell the masks. As I had a conversation with an artisan, he proudly said that the mask-making culture started more than 150 years ago by a king of Baghmundi. With few artisans, they were passing the knowledge of the Mask mask-making process from one generation to another; now they are the only community who are still nicely surviving with their century-old tradition. One of his sons added that to changing demand and economic conditions, previously this craft was limited to only *Chhau* dance purposes which is huge and costly; they modified and introduced new small variations of the mask to increase the selling at a cheaper price range for common people's home décor. I visited different streets of the villages where some villagers are doing last-minute touch-up up and some are busy selling the masks. After visiting the whole village I can conclude that every *Chhau* Dance mask is a story book which not only depicts the religious tales of God, Goddess and Demons but also depicts the resilience and continuity of traditional craft with a changing world.



These pictures show different stages of the Chhau mask-making process: paper layering, applying clay and keeping for sun drying (left to right).

Picture of two shops having different varieties of Masks

## BOOK REVIEW

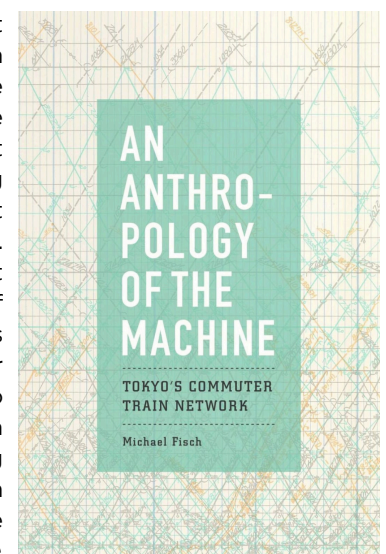
### An Anthropology of the Machine: Tokyo's Commuter Train Network

*Book reviewed by Asmita Srivastava*

Reading Michael Fisch's 'An Anthropology of the Machine' feels a bit like standing on a crowded Tokyo platform during rush hour—not because it's overwhelming, but because it forces you to pay attention to things that are usually invisible. This isn't a book about trains in the usual sense. It's about people and machines caught in a shared rhythm, improvising through a system that's both tightly controlled and strangely unpredictable. Fisch doesn't romanticize the commuter network or reduce it to cold systems theory. He's looking for a more difficult target: the muddled intersection of human behavior and technology. His concept of *yoyū*, a "margin of indeterminacy" or buffer zone, precisely expresses this. It's the area where the system bends rather than breaks. Delays, overcrowding, and last-minute decisions—all are incorporated into this delicate, almost biological balancing act. What really makes the book stand out is how Fisch brings together the physical and the emotional. He writes about the machinery, yes—the control systems, the operations—but he also writes about the toll: the fatigue of workers, the silent calculations of commuters

the tragedies that ripple through when things go wrong. The chapter on the *Amagasaki* derailment is particularly haunting—not sensational, just quiet and devastating. He forces you to sit with the discomfort of a system that values punctuality over people. The book also has a subtle media thread running through it, which explores how the commuting experience

appears in pop culture, internet forums, and public imagination. Fisch sees these as meaningful levels in how individuals interact with the system, rather than as





incidental allusions. In certain ways, Tokyo's trains become more than just infrastructure; they also serve as a cultural narrative. It's not a breezy read, and some parts lean heavily into academic theory, but there's real care in the writing. Fisch's ethnography is patient and detailed, and his observations feel lived-in. He doesn't tell you what to think—he just shows you what's there, what most of us would overlook, and lets it sit. If you're interested in cities, infrastructure, or the quiet ways technology shapes daily life, this book is worth your time. It doesn't offer neat takeaways. But it leaves you thinking about what it really means to move through a city alongside machines—and how much of ourselves we surrender to make that movement possible.

## PAST EVENT

- For our **Distinguished Guest lecture series**, an online lecture was organised and delivered by **Prof. Subhadra Channa** on May 22nd 2025, 6:30 pm onwards. For more details about the lecture, please visit- [Click here](#)



YouTube live Link - [Click here](#)

- The book launch and discuss of **“Disaster Planning and Governance in India: Expert’s Experiences and Insights”**, co-edited by **Dr. Sunita Reddy (Founder-Chair at AIF, Associate Professor at JNU)** and **Shri Anil Kumar Sinha (IAS Retd., BSDMA)**, was held on May 27th 2025, at IIC, Delhi at 5:30pm. Moderated by Dr. Anshu Sharma (SEEDS), the event featured tributes, felicitation, and reflections from Prof. Ian Davis (Visiting Professor, Kyoto, Lund & Oxford Brookes), Prof. Dhananjay Singh (ICSSR), R.K. Bhandari (INAE), Shri K.M. Singh (Policy Perspective Foundation), V.K. Sharma (IIPA, SSDMA), Shri A.K. Mangotra (DGSSD), and Dr. Chandrani Bandyopadhyay Neogi (SPA Delhi). The session closed with an interactive Q&A and concluding remarks. For more details about the event please visit - [Click here](#)  
YouTube live Link - [Click here](#)

To buy the book, please visit - [Click here](#)



## FORTHCOMING EVENT

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

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**Last Date to Apply:** 23.06.2025  
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- Public Engagement Communications Intern at Oxfam America  
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### 'CHILDHOOD MATTERS'

AIF's other magazine which is Participatory, Multilingual, Quarterly and also Digital can be accessed here: <https://abpublications.anthroposindiafoundation.com/childhood-matters/>

**For contributing articles and photographs to the magazine, sharing feedback or ordering print copies, kindly write to us at [aif.newsletter2025@gmail.com](mailto:aif.newsletter2025@gmail.com).**



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