

EVENT REPORT

Far Away From Home

INTERNATIONAL WEBINAR

MAY 25, 2020



"Peer Network Support and Wellbeing in times of the Coronavirus"

KRITIKA PANDEY
University of Southern California
Los Angeles



"Affective Spaces in Cities"

MAXIMILIAN APEL
Freie Universität Berlin
Berlin



"Re-imagining the Field-Ethnography in a post-Covid-19 Digital Era"

NILISHA VASHIST
University College London
London



"COVID-19 and Interfaith response in Wales"

SNEHA ROY
University of Wales
Wales



"Reintroducing yourself to creativity during the pandemic"

HARDIK GAURAV
Emotions in Frame Photography
Bristol

DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF DELHI

**Department of Anthropology
University of Delhi**

**Far Away From Home
INTERNATIONAL WEBINAR**

May 25, 2020

Conceptualised by

Dr. Avitoli G. Zhimo

Assistant Professor

Department of Anthropology

University of Delhi

Hosted and Edited by

Sagarika Rao

Rapporteurs

Somen Rath and Sweta Prasad

Abstract: The report pertains to the International Webinar namely, *Far Away From Home* organised by the Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi on May 25, 2020 wherein some of the brilliant alumni tellingly underscored their agency as they were readily negotiating with the pandemic-inflicted hurdles in their coursework as well as in the everyday chores. While Kritika Pandey spoke about “Peer Network Support and Wellbeing in times of the Coronavirus,” the other speakers namely, Maximilian Apel, Nilisha Vashist, Sneha Roy, and Hardik Gaurav spoke on the topics of “Affective Spaces in Cities,” “Re-imagining the Field-Ethnography in a post-COVID-19 Digital Era,” “COVID-19 and Interfaith response in Wales,” and “Reintroducing yourself to creativity during the pandemic,” respectively.

Sagarika Rao, a final year M.Sc. Anthropology student and the host for the event, credited Dr. Avitoli G. Zhimo for spearheading the initiative as she welcomed the audience, speakers, and the discussants while inviting the prestigious Chair, Prof. P. C. Joshi, to preside over the webinar. Prof. Joshi, in turn, extended his heartfelt wishes to all, especially the speakers who are alumni of the department.



Image 1: Prof. P. C. Joshi, the Head of the Department



Image 2: Dr. Avitoli G. Zhimo



Image 3: Sagarika Rao

Beginning the first session, Dr. Chakraverti Mahajan introduced Kritika Pandey, a Ph.D Scholar in the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, who subsequently deliberated on the chosen topic of “Peer Network Support and Wellbeing in times of the Coronavirus.”



Image 4: Dr. Chakraverti Mahajan

While throwing light on her research which seeks to underline the intersection of organisations and legal domestic clinics that advocate the well-being of the Filipino domestic workers in southern California, in particular, the speaker discussed how socialisation and fruitful ideational discussions with the peers have immensely helped her coursework progress in a pandemic stricken world. Talking of the adverse mental health impact on researchers, especially the graduate students who are constantly working under the pressure of producing quantifiable results for the respective department and, by extension, the university, the presenter, while acknowledging the spurt of several online forums aiming to address the issue which has now intensified in times of the COVID-19, suggested the need for a collaborative effort in academia. Critiquing the economical perspective that most universities in the States are associated with, Ms. Pandey suggests a restructuring of the pedagogical framework to reify the primary objective of knowledge production that the universities should focus upon,

by incorporating discussions pertaining to the production of new work and simultaneously accommodating new paradigm shifts in ethics and methodology. For instance, she suggested the systematic gauging of the potential of social media as well as the online platform for engagement and research at present. According to her, while upholding the narrative of a safe place for students, academia must necessarily evolve in times as demanding with innovative and productive initiatives based on an inclusive, collaborative approach thereby, successfully taking into consideration the immense diversity.

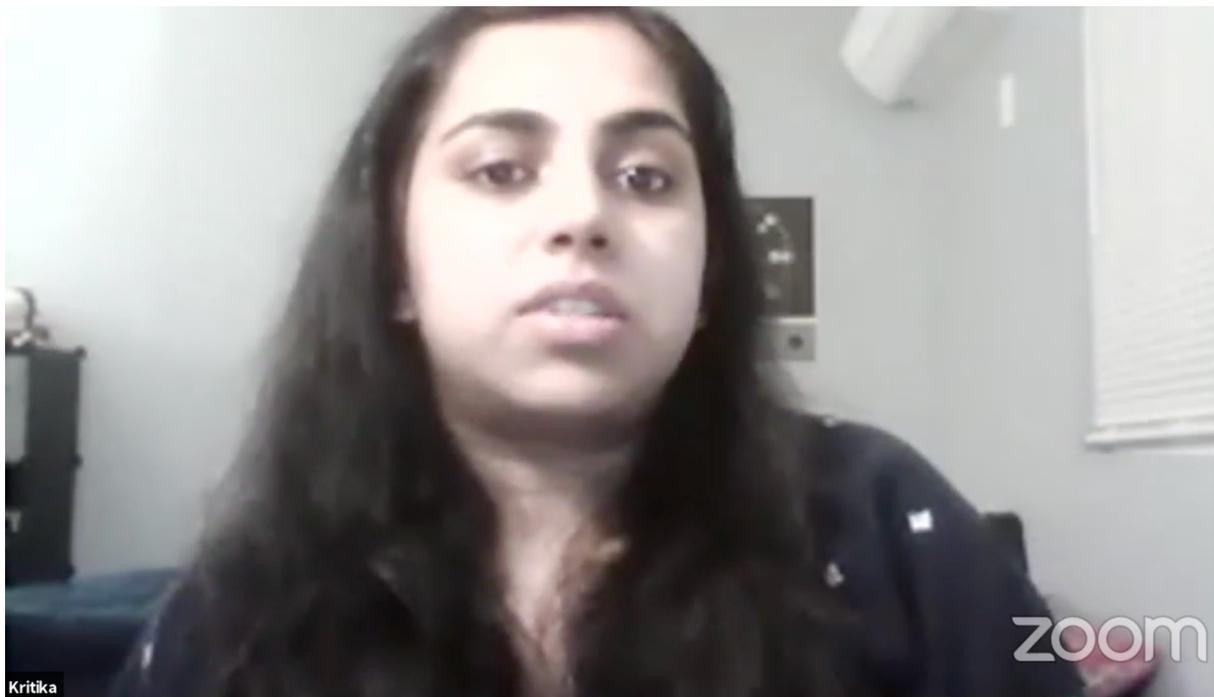


Image 5: Kritika Pandey

As Dr. Mahajan summarised the session while reiterating the need to rethink and redefine the approaches to accentuate their relative convenience and efficiency, there was great involvement on part of the audience. While Tanya Gill asked if there were any concrete systems in the speaker's university for the redressal of mental health issues, Arun Kumar asked her to suggest recommendations for students seeking to pursue academia as a career option, and Hemant Mishra inquired the ways the government in underdeveloped countries could provide psychological counselling. Prompt with her replies, Ms. Pandey delineated the role of student bodies in her university, in particular, in monitoring and creating a healthy

atmosphere for all scholars as a response to Ms. Gill. Further, after propounding the use of the internet as a tool for collaborative research and establishing democratic spaces in the academic domain wherein the scholars can easily share, discuss, and improvise methods in coping strategies, the speaker addressed the last question by suggesting that, at the national level, capping the loopholes in economic policies and vulnerabilities in the accessibility of the basic needs such that the latter are secured, could immensely work to address mental health issues.

In the second session, Maximilian Apel gave a presentation on “Affective Spaces in Cities” by taking an example of Görlitzer Park in Berlin, Germany. While giving a brief introduction of the small park that is located in the Kreuzberg district of Berlin, Mr. Apel linked the approach used, to his classes of “Urban Anthropology” in the department itself.



Image 6: Maximilian Apel

Tracing the history of how the park came into being, the speaker posited that in 1928, when Berlin had a peak population of about 4 million people, it was a train station responsible for

the transportation of, *inter alia*, coal and food supplies with the workers streaming in from the neighbouring villages. However, by the 1980s, in alignment with the advent of newer and more efficient import systems, the pre-existing train station was demolished and the place was converted into a public park by the authorities of western Berlin. In 1990, the first playground sprang at the same place. At present, the park, attracting visitors ranging from children and families to police officers, tourists, homeless people as well as drug dealers, often makes it to the everyday headlines while serving as an *affective space* for Mr. Apel's research. At this juncture, he introduced the theoretical approach wherein two terms namely, the relational term of *space* by Martina Löw and the *affective arrangements* by Jan Slaby, were explained. While the former refers to the concept of *space* as something that emerges out of elements or objects which are in relation to one another but not necessarily in the same physical space, the *affective arrangement*, according to him, was reified by the various debates revolving around the park in the media. He further posited that in order to learn about the affective space, one is required to trace the historical and urban contexts in addition to the socio-political encounters as well as the act of synthesis. For instance, the presenter underlined that while on the International Worker's Day (May 1) in 2018 a lot of people had gathered in the park, in 2020 amidst the pandemic, there were only a few people which, in turn, suggested the relatively weak relation between the objects and elements concerned currently. In congruence, he wondered about the COVID-19 inflicted prospects and impact on the other affective spaces in Berlin.

“Re-imagining the Field ethnography in a post COVID-19 digital era” was the topic of Nilisha Vashist, the next speaker, who shared the views based on her personal experience in the University College London after carefully weighing its global applicability as well as that in the case of fieldwork, in particular. Online classes, according to Ms. Vashist, worked as an impeding force for her university to finally utilise the already robust IT infrastructure to its full potential, post which online access to numerous journals and databases were increasingly granted for the ease of the student community. In a bid to devise newer and more efficient ways of conducting qualitative fieldwork in times which would have otherwise served as an untimely interlude for work premised on field-studies, UCL suggested the incorporation of interviews made possible by means of telecommunication services or online, social media

platforms, as a method for data collection. Further, in alignment with the numerous changes that have taken place in the last two decades after the neoliberal wave as well as the advent of the Internet, the speaker argued for the need to diverge from the age-old “Malinowskian” idea of rigorous fieldwork which entails the requirement to conduct studies amongst an “exotic” people situated in a place different from that of the researcher, to one most suitable to the needs of the present. While sighting an example of how “webinars” are slowly filling the gap of the numerous seminars that the pandemic has rendered impossible, Ms. Vashist suggested the urgent need for anthropologists to adopt the concept and practice of “Rapid Ethnography” which has primarily been associated with health professionals until now.



Image 7: Nilisha Vashist

As a proud former-supervisor as well as the discussant of the speaker, Prof. Joshi recalled his fieldwork experience when photography was the newly adopted tool of data collection thereby, reiterating the need to adapt to “modern” solutions such as the “Smart Ethnography” method which, according to him, was premised on the efficient use of the smartphone facilities to gather research data, in a bid to tide over the “modern” challenges in the face of the pandemic.

Further, as Dr. Minati raised questions regarding rapport establishment via digital means and the security of the online platform as a whole, Dr. Mitashree Srivastava, while citing the rejection of the digital platform by premier institutes such as JNU, expressed concerns pertaining to the increasing dualism in the educational fraternity. In response, Ms. Vashist delineated the application of the smart-phone technology as the only feasible means of conducting fieldwork until the situation is finally conducive for physical interaction, as she simultaneously underlined the widespread acceptance and use of the digital platform, as a successful alternative, in the academic enterprise which is, in turn, readily reflective the effective funding of the UK-based universities. However, in cognisance of the lack of funds in the context of other criteria characteristic of the Indian universities, Ms. Vashist questioned if India could afford to lag behind in times when the distinction between the online and that which is offline has been blurred beyond realisation.

Lastly, responding to the Sohini Sinha's concerns of conducting mental health research from home, the speaker highlighted the contribution of social media platforms such as that of Facebook in providing pertinent data while simultaneously contextualising the research endeavour.

The subsequent session had Sneha Roy, currently a Ph.D scholar in the University of Wales, discuss the topic of "COVID-19 and Interfaith response in Wales." In the brief introduction of her fieldwork experience in Myanmar, the speaker highlighted her efforts in reconciling the Buddhist and Muslim religious leaders as they decidedly joined course to endorse post-war transitional justice. By the virtue of prayers, meetings, and counselling, Ms. Roy unveiled the tremendous contribution of inter-religious relations in effectively promoting both spiritual and religious harmony and, by extension, social co-existence thereby, transcending all administrative efforts at the same. This led the researcher to conclude that while individuals, on an everyday basis, refrain from inter-religious interactions, the leaders eagerly correspond to the societal needs in the guise of having to address social issues

whenever their assistance is sought after. However, while highlighting the aforementioned insights, the speaker additionally addressed the difficulties she faced during research of which the almost negligible usage of smartphones or communication to the world outside her field stood rather pertinent. Moving on, in the context of Wales, the presenter delineated the extended role of the priest in the present-day welfare packages which move beyond the performance of rituals and incantations as the funerals are now increasingly attended online in addition to the counselling sessions which are gradually acquiring momentum. Conclusively, while regarding the prevailing conditions in Wales along with that of the Eid celebrations of the previous day, in particular, as the epitome of communal harmony and interfaith relations amongst a “mosaic” population, Ms. Roy reiterated the contribution of communal interfaith in both upholding and strengthening the foundations of humanity for the tougher times to come.



Image 8: Sneha Roy

Prof. Joshi, the discussant, called upon Dr. Alahari Papa Rao’s comments, who, in turn, emphasised the need to utilise the immense potential of the smartphone technology presenting itself as the most viable means in times as such. Further, Suryasnata sought the speaker’s views on the interfaith mistrust between religious communities in India as well as

communal violence and Dr. Mahajan wondered if the pandemic had, in any way, challenged the very idea of religion. While Ms. Roy attributed the highly sensitive and controversial instances of communal violence in India to individual wants rather than communal needs and hoped for the communities to move beyond slander to come together and build an integrated nation, in a response to the latter, the speaker highlighted the paucity of time and occasion for the religious leaders to contemplate the impact of the COVID-19 on the religious discourse for they have been exceptionally busy with reorienting their ways, in the guise of online summons and prayers, to stay stronger in these testing times.

Finally, responding to Toshali's concern regarding the viability, reliability, and credibility of the conducting interviews online, the speaker suggested some amount of triangulation to compensate for the non-verbal cues which otherwise supplement interpretation in the case of verbal communication.

Dr. Mitashree Srivastava introduced Hardik Gaurav, a Bristol-based freelance photographer at his start-up namely, *Emotions in Frame Photography* and the final speaker to present on the topic of "Reintroducing yourself to creativity during the pandemic."



Image 9: Dr. Mitashree Srivastava

To contextualise the narrative of having found “lost or forgotten creativity” during the lockdown, the speaker traced the journey back to his initial days in Bristol. Crediting his curiosity and creativity for allowing the introvert that he was to finally adapt to and settle in the city as a wedding photographer, like all others, Mr. Gaurav had a great many expectations from 2020. The visit to India in the earlier days of the year had him amongst the Shaheen Bagh protest which served as a window of both clashes as well as the intimate, emotional network of the protesters, post which, amidst the pandemic-stricken lockdown, the speaker found himself in an existential crisis thereby, straying away from photography which was the one thing he was always passionate about. Searching for the meaning of life as he looked around, he came across multiple accounts of his friends reviving lost-lost hobbies, rekindling long-forgotten passions, or even adopting newer ones. Subsequently drawing inspiration while also reflexively succumbing to the needs of the present, as the speaker indulged in household chores which were once alien to him, he moved on to highlight the way the pandemic has worked to break the glass ceiling of patriarchy in the guise of readily reducing the gender-gap in terms of the contribution to domestic chores.



Image 10: Hardik Gaurav

Not long after the realisation, amidst incessant inspiration, Mr. Gaurav resumed photography with the “Words Matter” series. According to him, the pandemic has ignited the latent responsibility in individuals, as well as in himself, to come forward and try new things while finally addressing those that had long been forgotten or neglected. Therefore, as he plans to do the same while considering it a necessary period of rejuvenation for his passion, borrowing the words of Victor Frankl, the speaker concluded the session, *“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”*

Highlighting the philosophical touch that accompanies each of his photographs and regarding Mr. Gaurav’s work as a blend of the sub-disciplines of visual and business anthropology, Dr. Mitashree Srivastava opened the stage for discussion. While Vandana Meher inquired about the impact of the lockdown on the photography business in the future, Tajinder Kaur wondered how he instilled empathy in photography along with controlling the politics of interpretation. As for the future of the photography business is concerned, the speaker remarked that there is nothing to worry about for the pandemic has not resulted in the ultimate cancellation of events but only an untimely pause marked with an increased understanding and empathy amongst people who have promised future ventures nevertheless. Furthermore, in a response to Ms. Kaur, the speaker reiterated the need for both parties to be understanding such that the events are allowed to take their natural course. Lastly, Dr. Mahajan sought Mr. Gaurav’s comments on the pandemic and Shaheen Bagh, as he has experienced. Prompt with his response, the speaker rendered the experience as something much more than a mere documentation process for him. Flying in primarily to seek the truth, Mr. Gaurav spoke of his encounter with diverse visual representations of humanity and nationalism, for a protest to be regarded “anti-national,” in the forms of free medical camps, a safe space for deliberation and discussion, and the photographs of Ambedkar and Gandhi, the very founders of the nation, amongst numerous other elements. He urged the gathering not to remain neutral or silent for it is only the people’s voice that uncovers deep-rooted injustices and concerns in a democracy. In congruence, as Prof. Joshi regarded the protest as a dance of democracy, co-existence, he hoped, could only be achieved when people were willing to increase interaction and, by extension, harmoniously resolve differences.

Finally, the Chair congratulated the speakers for their effort and thanked them for investing their time in the webinar. Further, as he expressed his sincere gratitude to Dr. Avitoli G. Zhimo for organising the webinar and acknowledged the efforts of Sagarika Rao, Prof. Joshi thanked the audience for partaking in the webinar.

Conclusively, Dr. Zhimo reiterated the necessity, in the guise of the webinar, to reconnect with the premier department's community which could not have been possible without the support of the Head of the Department, Prof. P. C. Joshi. Thanking the vibrant speakers for their enthralling presentations, Dr. Zhimo expressed her sincere gratitude to Dr. Chakraverti Mahajan and Dr. Mitashree Srivastava for their praiseworthy efforts in keeping the discussions engaging. Lastly, she thanked the host, the rapporteurs, and the audience for making the webinar successful.

The poster is for an international webinar titled "Far Away From Home" held on Monday, May 25, 2020, at 12:30 IST. It is organized by the Department of Anthropology at the University of Delhi. The poster features five speakers, each with a portrait, a topic, and their affiliation:

Speaker	Topic	Institution
KRITIKA PANDEY	"Peer Network Support and Wellbeing in times of the Coronavirus"	University of Southern California, Los Angeles
MAXIMILIAN APEL	"Affective Spaces in Cities"	Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin
NILISHA VASHIST	"Re-imagining the Field-Ethnography in a post-Covid-19 Digital Era"	University College London, London
SNEHA ROY	"COVID-19 and Interfaith response in Wales"	University of Wales, Wales
HARDIK GAURAV	"Reintroducing yourself to creativity during the pandemic"	Emotions in Frame Photography, Bristol

Contact: Sagarika Rao
9560917877

ZOOM Cloud Meeting App
Meeting ID: 832 8116 7648
Password: 250520anth

Image 11: The official poster of the webinar, "Far Away From Home"