



DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY  
UNIVERSITY OF DELHI

PANEL DISCUSSION  
ON  
CULTURAL DIVERSITY OF INDIA

DATE: 29TH JULY 2019

TIME: 3:00 PM

VENUE: SEMINAR ROOM

PANELISTS

**PROF. P. C. JOSHI**

Head, Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi

**PROF. R. B. SINGH**

Head, Department of Geography, University of Delhi

**SH. ASHOK KUMAR SHARMA, IFS**

Former Ambassador – Guest of Honour

**DR. SANJEEB KUMAR PATJOSHI, IPS**

Joint Secretary, Ministry of Panchayati Raj – Guest of Honour

**DR. ASHOK KUMAR PANDA**

Senior Advocate, Supreme Court of India

**DR. URFAT A. MIR**

School of Liberal Studies, Ambedkar University, New Delhi

**DR. R. P. MITRA**

Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi

**DR. AVITOLI G. ZHIMO**

Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi

**DR. RAVINDER SINGH**

Department of Medical Anthropology, IHBAS, Delhi

JOINT ORGANIZERS

**PROF. MANVENDRA KISHORE DAS**

Buddhist Scholar, Sarnath, UP

**DR. BHABANI DIKSHIT**

Managing Editor, World Focus, Delhi

**MS. PRAMODA PATEL**

Editor, NAM Today, New Delhi

## **Panel Discussion**

**Topic:** “Cultural Diversity of India”

**Date:** 29<sup>th</sup> July, 2019

**Venue:** Seminar Room, Department of Anthropology

### ***Report compiled by***

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### ***Photography***

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## Introduction:

The Panel Discussion on Cultural Diversity of India was focused on bringing out a reflexive conversation on the intricacies of essentially what it means to be diverse. The aim was to also discuss how this immense cultural diversity manifests and establishes itself and the importance of recognising the value of it in our lives. Another important part of the seminar included the sharing of individual experiences of the complexities of cultural encounters and the knowledge thus produced.

The welcome note by **Prof. P C Joshi** opened the floor for the panel discussion as he reiterated the aim of bringing together the thoughts of academics, policy makers and intellectuals in order to gain a fresh perspective on cultural diversity. Prof. Joshi also shared with the gathering that the panel discussion would be preceded by the release of the special issue of the Journal NAM today titled 'Cultural Diversity of India'.



The guests of honour were gifted with Naga Shawls as *Dr. Avitoli Zhimo* explained to the gathering about the symbolic importance of a Naga shawl as representing the achieved status of the individuals it belonged to. Dr. Zhimo also discussed the ways in which the Naga Shawls, with the very varied colour patterns and designs, distinctly distinguishing the Naga tribe and group these belonged to, were another great example of the material expression of cultural variations as well as specificity.





The special issue of the Journal NAM today was released by the invited guests and Prof. Joshi followed by a very brief overview of what this issue focused on and the expanse it hoped to cover.

### **Summarising the Panel Discussion:**

The panel discussion began with the opening comments by Prof. Joshi about the idea of diversity and what it meant in the Indian context.

**Prof. R B Singh** congratulated Prof. Joshi and Ms. Pramoda Patel (Editor, NAM today) on the release of the special issue of NAM today titled 'Cultural Diversity in India'. He went on to describe the ways in which India encompasses a huge array of religious, cultural and social practices that make it a mega-diversity area in the true sense. Using examples from across



communities, like the differences between the practices of fishing among the fishing communities in the west versus the fishing groups of the eastern part of the country, Prof. Singh emphasised just how huge the canvas of differences was in the country. He then discussed the importance of identifying that there is a need to analyse at local levels the historical, cultural and social aspects of existence to fulfil

the achievement of sustainable growth. This he believed, would lead finally to the fulfilment of the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals that India as a nation has committed towards.

**Sh. Ashok Kumar Sharma**

focused on the importance to have an unbiased, scientific and rational approach to complexities and issues that arise in our multicultural setting. He emphasised that the ultimate aim should be always to create a country that values diversity in the true sense instead of token shows of coexistence and inclusiveness.



Taking the example of asylum seekers, migrants from economically struggling areas with political unrest, he discussed how a multicultural network like India cannot back away from accepting people from outside when its own present population is a sea of people with roots from all across the world (example by Sh. Sharma about genetic linkages found between the Banjaras of India and Roma community in Europe). He also focused on the dangers of 'mythology becoming history' in political and social settings which he believed was the root cause of misinformation, fear and irrational judgements against people different from the ones being manipulated. He concluded with the thought that it is imperative in today's times to challenge false and twisted forms of information circulation in order to thwart narratives of suspicion and hatred.



**Dr. Patjoshi** brought to fore the importance of developing sensitivity towards cultures 'different' from us by talking of the difference between unknowingly misunderstanding a cultural norm and knowingly disrupting the varied socio-cultural fabric around us. In his brief talk, Dr. Patjoshi talked about the need to create methods of cultural exchange that create a more solidified understanding of the cultural

diversity, thus also creating avenues for inclusive growth and sustainable progress unique as well as specific to the issues of our area.



**Dr. Ashok Panda** drew on his personal experiences to bring into discussion the importance of the right kind of exposure and education towards promoting socio-cultural acceptance. Talking of his own first actual brush with diversity in his early years as a Law student in the metropolitan hub of Delhi, Dr. Panda emphasised that it was his experience in the

university with peers from across diverse regions of the country which cemented his understanding of respect for things 'different' from his own. He commented that diversity is truly the greatest asset to our country's demography and is the defender of our democratic way of life. He then discussed the need to impart knowledge of the constitution as an important step in making people aware of the rights and duties as fellow human beings towards each other for harmonious coexistence. He talked of the differences between the west and the east, commenting that while the west focused always on dominating nature, we in the east have always believed in living at peace with the environment with the belief in 'right to life of all sentient beings'. He concluded by commenting that this understanding should follow our exploration and interaction with the cultural diversity around us, guided by constitutional awareness, to lead into a more peaceful tomorrow.



**Dr. Urfat A. Mir**, through his academic exploration and personal experience of the socio-cultural region of Kashmir, discussed the intricacies of how interactions across time shape and create an identity which is often composite and an amalgamation of the different cultural strands it comes in contact of historically. Elaborating on the

example of Kashmir, Dr. Mir talked of the diversity of language, food habits and religio-cultural beliefs across the areas of Jammu, Kashmir and Leh. He explained how a belief in spiritual leaders like Nadrishi (a Sufi saint) moves beyond religious barriers and brings together people from different communities in line with each other over this connection of faith. He also mentioned the need to look through the

different layers of culture that exist in the daily lives of people in the form of folklore, food, art, material culture etc. He concluded with emphasis on an urgent requirement to evolve and utilise anthropological innovations to study diversity in the present time in order to understand the local and global binding factors and bring in insights to help preserve and protect cultural uniqueness.



**Dr. R P Mitra** brought in a new dimension to the panel to discuss as he dwelt on the importance of recognizing the distinction between cultural diversity and cultural pluralism. He posed the intrinsic question that though India may have been plural in the past, what was it that we are heading towards in the present? Dr. Mitra, using Barnard Cohen's idea of 'India's

pluralism with its roots in the haphazardness of it all', also discussed the specific nature that distinguishes the Indian Civilisation, in his opinion. He explained that the spirit of tolerance, the strife for harmony and coexistence as well as the selective incorporation of various cultural streams together in the course of history are what make India a unique centre of cultural pluralism. Dr. Mitra emphasised that these are the factors to understand and explore in order to truly understand meaning and depth of diversity in Indian context. He also discussed the way in which cultural embeddedness across the region can never be misconstrued as homogeneity as no culture is complete in itself and yet is distinct enough to be unique in its own right.

**Dr. Avitoli G. Zhimo** brought in the idea of peaceful coexistence and harmonious exchanges using her visual anthropological fieldwork experience in Zunheboto, Nagaland. She explained the ways in which the town of Zunheboto, nestled in the beautiful hills of Nagaland, comprises of a demography consisting of not just Sumi Naga



community but Marwari community (traders who have settled there for business), Hindu and Muslim groups from Bihar and nearby region who work in the area among others. She described how the small

town of Zunheboto has become a microcosm of peacefully coexisting different groups, with temples, mosques and Asia's largest church all in the periphery of the place, with people using each other's religious references to explain their own specific practices as well as exchanging knowledge of languages to communicate better with each other. Through this example, Dr. Zhimo focused on emphasising the ways in which acceptance rather than tolerance can lead to respectful understanding of cultures that are different from people's own.



**Dr. Ravinder Singh** from IHBAS in his brief comments pointed out to the importance of study of what he termed as 'social pathology' in the context of socio-cultural diversity in order to understand and resolve issues and practices of discrimination that stem from and are rooted in differences as well as lack of acceptance of these differences. He concluded with a

stress on the importance to "find a single thread to hold it together, in the midst of thousand reasons to break apart".

### Vote of Thanks:

Dr. Avitoli Zhimo was called upon to give the vote of thanks and bring the event to a conclusion after the discussion ended. Dr. Zhimo graciously thanked the guests and panellists reiterating the importance of such discussions for a constructive positive change towards the betterment of the socio-cultural exchanges



and associated policy concerns. She also thanked Prof. Joshi for his tireless efforts and initiatives towards the academic growth of the department through events like these. She ended her speech with an expression of gratitude towards the gathering for being active, engaging listeners and making the event a success.