

NEWS IN BRIEF

IMPRESSIONS FROM A WORLD CONFERENCE OF ETHNOLOGISTS AND ANTHROPOLOGISTS IN INDIA

The 19th IUAES-WAU World Ethnology and Anthropology Congress under the heading “Marginalities, Uncertainties, and World Anthropologies: Enlivening Past and Envisioning Future” took place in New Delhi, India, on 14–20 October and the post-congress “Anthropology and Digital Cultures” in Hyderabad on 26–27 October 2023.

The plenary presentations emphasised the need to increasingly involve culture researchers in solving global problems. The participants acknowledged the practical applicability potential of the expert knowledge of anthropologists, folklorists, and researchers in other neighbouring disciplines, stating that they can largely complement the contribution of experts from other fields in shaping policies and decisions related to topical issues, such as the climate crisis, green transition, rights of minorities (including ethnic groups with traditional lifestyle), or migration problems. As could have been expected, problems related to COVID-19 pandemic were frequently discussed, especially in the context of marginal groups, but also the lessons and ways of adaptation learnt (e.g., changes in rituals, religion, occupations). Attempts were made to outline, in light of past and current crises, the future directions and visions of anthropology and ethnology as disciplines.

As it was a big world conference, twenty parallel panels were planned for the first days. However, real life showed that many of the speakers were not able to come, so it was somewhat easier to decide which of the panels to choose. In addition to the panels, it was possible to participate in the extensive programme of anthropological films and explore the display of specialised literature, which presented high-level research, some of which is unfortunately unknown in Europe.

Reet Hiiemäe presented her paper at the panel of the main conference, “Spiriting technologies of affect, feeling detachment: Dynamics of (re)shaping marginality, uncertainty, and wellbeing through spiritual practices”, speaking about women’s private mourning rituals which simultaneously involve affectivity and conscious contact-making with the bereaved one as well as creating distance from the mourning experience. This panel also included presentations related to very different cultures and marginal groups, for example, a paper about a monk in northeastern Thailand making tattoos with spiritual symbolics as well as his clients, a study of a Japanese gay spiritual healer, and a paper about how Western African pentecostalists treat possessed people and mediate the process through digital platforms. It was exciting to see that despite different cultural contexts the presentations featured certain common elements, which initiated lively discussions.



Reet Hiimäe. Photograph by Andrus Tins 2024.

Andrus Tins also made a presentation at the main conference, speaking on the topic “Digital space as a coping resource: Insecurities and hopes on the Estonian online forums regarding the Green New Deal” in the panel “Digital culture: Continuities of the physical and virtual worlds”. Although several panels at the main conference in Delhi were dedicated to digital topics, the post-conference in Hyderabad specially related to digitality had the potential of being even more interesting. It was the first time within the framework of the IUAES-WAU world conferences that a separate several-days conference was dedicated to digital culture studies. Many of the presentations focused on the use of digital resources in the preservation and popularisation of museals and anthropological materials, as well as studies related to them. However, presentations on the study of anthropological and folkloristic material related to the virtual manifestation of phenomena were also represented. On the one hand, digitality seems to have become so inherent in culture that, compared to non-digital culture, it attracts unequal attention; on the other hand, it requires more serious attention considering the digitality of today’s world. In other words, at this special post-conference anthropological study of cultures and societies through the digital sphere was rather scantily represented. One of the reasons for this might be that most of the panel convenors and speakers were

Indians and their research traditions are more classical. Also, there are many tribal cultures in India which are in the so-called rescue collection phase, which means that the main interest lies in recording their pre-digital culture as mobile phones and the Internet are rapidly occupying these regions.

There were also presentations based on classical fieldwork, dealing with manifestations related to the transfer of human activities into digital spheres. For example, one presentation described the traditional way of life of a tribe at the foot of the Himalayas in light of extensive digital changes in society. The members of the tribe traditionally engaged in trade seasonally travel a distance of more than 2,000 kilometres to sell their products. Although today the majority of trade transactions have moved to web platforms, the tribe members argued that trade through direct contacts runs in their blood and the attempts to practise trading online have failed.

In general, life in India seemed to be more progressive and innovative than before. As India hosted the G20 Summit in 2023, extensive arrangements had been made, green areas had been created, and street lighting had been improved. As to digital culture, we had a somewhat unexpected experience in a supermarket, where the cashier asked us for the mobile number, as mobile-based digital payment was the main medium of payment. Cash payment was possible, but there was no change in the till, so only rounded sums could be paid in cash. Hyderabad, the venue of the conference dedicated to digital topics, is a modern city with new quarters of skyscrapers, and compared to Delhi it is considerably more western. It was culturally enriching to visit this region in addition to Delhi.

Reet Hiimäe, Andrus Tins