

# Two Interviews by Vinicius Kauê Ferreira: Chandana Mathur (National University of Ireland, Maynooth) and Soumendra Patnaik (University of Delhi)

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**Figure 1.**

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Vinicius Kauê Ferreira is a PhD student in social anthropology at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, France, where he also received his master's degree, after attaining his undergraduate degree in social sciences at the Federal University of Santa Catarina in Florianópolis, Brazil. His research looks at the trajectory of Indian social scientists seeking to build their careers in Europe in the contemporary moment. He was vice president and president of the Association of Brazilian Researchers and Students in France (2011–2013) and founder/editor of *Novos Debates* (2013–2015), a journal of the Brazilian Anthropological Association. His research interests include migration, gender, postcolonial studies, intellectual history, and the history of the social sciences. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

## FOREWORD

The interviews published in this issue of *American Anthropologist* seek to contribute to the global conversations that the World Anthropologies section has been fostering in recent years. We may not all agree about whether globalization is a recent phenomenon, but I am convinced that we all agree that social issues of a global sort require global dialogues that also take the local into account. To that end, the interviews I conducted with Chandana Mathur and Soumendra Patnaik, and that AA includes here, focus on how social issues, intellectual trajectories, and scientific institutions are intertwined, and shape and reshape global connections. These interviews not only ask about the role of anthropology in responding to contemporary challenges but also ask how our discipline itself is being challenged and how it responds to those challenges. The accounts Chandana Mathur and Soumendra Patnaik provide capture a good deal of such social and disciplinary transformations. My aim in interviewing them was to explore aspects of both their personal trajectories and their academic work that epitomize anthropology's efforts to engage in these global issues. What is more, as the attentive reader may notice, in interviewing them I sought to explore the possibility that anthropology might make some progress in such global conversations by adopting a more symmetrical attitude when it comes to institutional and epistemological practices.

That said, it would be judicious to affirm that Chandana Mathur's and Soumendra Patnaik's accounts are of great value in and of themselves. They may, in fact, help us understand this period of change that affects both the people we study and the institutional organization of the discipline. Although there are clear differences between their topics of research and their personal trajectories, the connections and convergences between them are conspicuous. On one hand, it is true that they devote their work to different topics—in Mathur's case to labor and communalism, and in Patnaik's case to development projects. But it is also true that both realms they study are affected by global transformations. In addition, I want readers to notice that both Mathur and Patnaik have taken on leadership roles in the development and growth of anthropological institutions, such as the World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA), the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES), and Antropólogos sem Fronteiras (ASF), and how both come across as working on an international and transnational level, acknowledging the many national traditions that constitute anthropology but still working to make those relations more symmetrical. This is why I invite the reader to read both interviews. They may present the perspectives of two different researchers with distinct trajectories, but they also contribute, in a very complementary way, to elucidating the complex landscape of anthropology around the world.

## CHANDANA MATHUR

### Research Topics

**Vinicius Kauê Ferreira (VKF):** You have been doing some important research on communalism and the diasporic Hindu right in the United States. What is more, you have been trying to depict a broader picture in order to show how this phenomenon is entangled with more comprehensive processes, such as globalization, economic liberalization, and nationalisms. I would like to start by asking you what your perspective is on the present and future of nationalism. How has nationalism been reshaped over the recent decades and what role have diasporas played in that process?

**Chandana Mathur (CM):** I should first clarify that my writings on diasporic Hindu nationalism are reflections based on more than a decade of doing political battle against the religious right in the South Asian American context. They are not derived from anthropological field research—they draw on “observant participation” rather than “participant observation.” There is a fine tradition of bringing together political organizing and ethnographic practice in engaged scholarship in our discipline, so I can lay claim to being a follower of this long-standing form of anthropological praxis. But it is also important, of course, to acknowledge that political activism and scholarly output may lead away from each other. There most definitely are times when issues are better addressed by organizing street protests rather than by offering analytical acuity within the pages of an academic publication.

You are quite right that I am interested in understanding the nature and emergence of the diasporic Hindu right not merely within the affective domain of long-distance nationalism but also in the context of the convulsive restructurings of contemporary capitalism. New nodes of power have established themselves in what used to be the periphery. New entities and relationships have been churned into being by the processes of capital accumulation. Thus, the rise of the nonresident Indian (NRI) as a discernible quantity in India's public and policy discourse after economic liberalization in the 1990s corresponds with the efflorescence of Hindu-right groups in the diaspora and their rising influence.

Often very affluent, these diasporic groups are positioned to powerfully shape the agendas both in India and in the countries in which they are based. It is their wealth that funds hate groups and right-wing grassroots and “development” organizations in India. It is they who pack Madison Square Garden (in New York) and Wembley Stadium (in London) whenever Narendra Modi, India's prime minister and a key demagogue of the Hindu right, is visiting the West. By thus making themselves visible as a distinct and big-spending bloc, they are in a position to advance their political priorities in the societies they now inhabit. In my view, it is the extraordinary reach of their agendas in these very different contexts that makes it necessary for us to reappraise the ways in which we have previously understood nationalism.



**Figure 2.**

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Dr. Chandana Mathur has been teaching in the Department of Anthropology at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, since 2003. She holds a PhD in social anthropology from

the New School for Social Research in New York, a master's in sociology from the University of Delhi, and an undergraduate degree in economics from the prestigious St. Stephen's College of the University of Delhi. Mathur has published extensively on transformations of labor under regimes of economic liberalization, communalism and Hindu right-wing politics, as well as the globalization of the social sciences. She was vice chair and chair of the Anthropological Association of Ireland (2008–2010 and 2010–2012). She was elected deputy chair of the World Council of Anthropological Associations in 2014 and chair of the WCAA for the period 2016–2018. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

**VKF:** Your earlier research addressed contemporary economic and social transformations of labor as they were experienced by US workers. At that moment, you seemed to be interested not only in representations articulated by those people vis-à-vis globalization and new managerial discourses but also in how those men forged collective sentiments centered on nationalist narratives. Can we say that your recent interests in diasporic communalism are somehow related to that context or that both topics are somehow linked by this very question of nationalism and identities?

**CM:** Part of what unites my work on the diasporic Hindu right with my research among US industrial workers is a concern with developing anthropological understandings of the long-term consequences of a quite specific moment of large-scale historical transformation.

I first arrived in the state of Indiana in the US heartland to begin my fieldwork in the world-changing year of 1989. This was the year that marked the momentous end of the Cold War era, celebrated ever since in media images of the crumbling of the Berlin Wall. I stayed there until the summer of 1991, until after the local Fourth of July parade had celebrated the US victory at the end of the Gulf War—the first large-scale conflict of the new world order. Although the 1989 watershed is frequently discussed in a variety of global contexts, it is not always remembered that it also had enormous consequences for mainstream life in the United States. It was long after my fieldwork that I myself came to realize that this had been a very fortuitous vantage point. Though I was not aware of it then, it was a unique opportunity for a detailed ethnographic consideration of that historical moment, with its changing vistas of work and war.

The profound changes that were happening in the world of work in the United States were pretty much visible to the naked eye. I will never forget a kitchen-table conversation one night at the home of a factory worker, when he and his wife spoke about the arrangement of his work shifts and the ways in which it affected every area of their lives. I was forcefully reminded of the nineteenth-century struggles over the length of the working day as I listened to them. So much so that I had to go back and reread chapter ten of Marx's *Capital* to make sense of it, and eventually I used this analysis to frame what I wrote about them (Mathur [1998](#)).

In India, the 1989 conjuncture led directly to the era of neoliberal reform, as capitalism came to be seen as the only game in town. The world that we now inhabit started up in some crucial ways at that moment. There has been a far-reaching transformation of capitalism, of nationalism (as you have noted), in both India and Indiana.

**VKF:** Very recently, in 2015, you returned to the town in the US where, twenty-five years ago, you carried out fieldwork as a student. I suppose that that was, above all, an excellent

opportunity to revisit your former reflections and to witness transformations experienced by that community. Why did you return and what did you learn from this experience?

**CM:** These two periods of fieldwork—the initial 1989–1991 stay and the shorter visit over the summer of 2015—have spanned the duration of a generation. I felt like a time traveler when I went back to Indiana! I was amazed to find almost everybody again, amazed that more than one person remarked on the fact that they had only just been talking about me only days before I showed up again after an almost twenty-five-year hiatus.

Things have changed, and of course, they have remained the same. Indiana is now an anti-union “right to work” state. This is immediately evident in the structuring of the regional political economy. I am told that they are mining as much coal now as they were in 1989–1991, but there is not one union coal mine left in Indiana. Some of the struggles have hardly changed at all. Having spent innumerable hours in discussions, meetings, and demonstrations regarding the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with union members in 1989–1991, I found myself in a whirlwind of discussions, meetings, and demonstrations regarding the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as soon as I touched down in the summer of 2015.

It is an enormous privilege to circle back and revisit your own fieldwork, and indeed your own life, after a period of more than two decades.

**VKF:** An important, even urgent, issue that has engaged anthropologists today is the humanitarian crisis in the Middle East, also called “the refugee crisis” in Europe (which the European corporate media misleadingly names “the migration crisis”). In a recent book you coedited with Deana Heath (Heath and Mathur [2011](#)), a specific contribution by Aminah Mohammad-Arif suggests that conservative diasporic Hindu communities have fostered the construction of anti-Muslim sentiments in the United States. What is your opinion of this?

**CM:** While Islamophobia in the United States and Europe has a separate genealogy from Islamophobia in India, the two variants can and do fan each other's flames. A particularly ugly and absurd example of political rapprochement on the basis of a shared hatred for all Muslims is the large-scale pre-election event in support of Donald Trump hosted by the Republican Hindus of New Jersey.

As someone living in Europe, I don't think it is accurate to say that European anti-Muslim sentiments can be attributed to the diasporic Hindu right. Especially now, as throngs of war-shattered people make their way into Europe from West Asia and North Africa, they are met by an ingrained Islamophobia that is disturbingly reminiscent of the horrible heyday of European anti-Semitism. It may be more important to examine the component parts of anti-Semitism in order to understand the structuring of the contemporary anti-Muslim discourse. The Hindu right's forms of hatred that have featured so importantly in my own political and intellectual work are less likely to be relevant here.

**VKF:** Fieldwork for your dissertation was among workers at an aluminum plant in southern Indiana. Is it correct to say that it was, and still is, a most unusual choice for a foreign student of anthropology in the United States to carry out research in and on the United States? Usually, foreign students in the “center” tend to, and are expected to, develop research projects about their “homelands.” Was that the case when you were a student in the United States? If yes, has this changed since then?



**CM:** Yes, it was (and sadly, still is) unusual. As a woman scholar from India, I had initially been drawn to the project by the paucity of studies of Western societies by anthropologists from my part of the world. It was indeed difficult to swim against the standard assumption that I would be going back to my own Third World country to harvest fieldwork data to earn a doctorate at a US institution. There were predictable difficulties in carrying out a research project in the US—from resource constraints to the absence of interlocutors—the by now well-understood intellectual consequences of the prevailing global inequities, first brought to light by the “world anthropologies” movement. It is distressing that a good twenty-five years after my first fieldwork endeavor, it is still hard to find published monographs written by non-US or non-European anthropologists that draw upon long-term fieldwork among white Americans living in the US heartland.

### Academic Trajectory

**VKF:** You are an international researcher, someone who has carved a trajectory through different countries over the past twenty years. You were born in India. You completed your undergraduate and master's degrees at the University of Delhi. You received your PhD in the United States from the New School for Social Research. Since 2003, you have been based in Ireland at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. First of all, I would like to ask you how you define yourself—and maybe other academics with the same kind of trajectory—vis-à-vis this mobile academic life. As diasporic, a nomad, a cosmopolitan, an overseas, a global citizen?

**CM:** It is interesting to try to address this question just after Theresa May has proclaimed that “if you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere!” Her grand xenophobia immediately tempts me to declare myself a “citizen of the world” or, even better, a proud “citizen of nowhere.” In fact, I don't really have a ready self-definition to offer, but I do think that my kind of trajectory is peculiarly compatible with the discipline of anthropology. On the plus side, I like very much the feeling of being completely at home in three very disparate human contexts and the accompanying instability of perspective. On the other hand, there is also a permanent feeling of loss and longing for places and people left behind, and we might want to think about how this sensibility of affliction runs as an undercurrent through the writing of anthropology.

**VKF:** I would like to explore this cosmopolitan trajectory by reflecting on the role of the international researcher nowadays. Can we, in your view, talk about the vantage point of the “nomadic” scholar with regard to contemporary anthropology and broader societal debates? Especially at a moment when migrants have been not only a target for xenophobic discourses but also a source of it, what is the role of the migrant scholar where she lives and at the international level today?

**CM:** Over the years, I have begun to think that self-critical scholarship is almost more important—politically and intellectually—than critical scholarship. We are each best placed to understand and forcefully confront the discourses of hatred that flourish within our own group, whether at home or in the diaspora. Internal critique seems to me to be the most just division of intellectual and political labor, and the least complicit in the circuits of power through which these xenophobic discourses circulate. So it should be principally my task to speak out about the Hindu right, while those from within other migrant groups must uncover and challenge their own particular forms of hate. Perhaps the antiracism movement should not be our concern at all but that of comrades from mainstream society. Yes, I am aware that

this harks back to “strategic essentialism,” and, of course, I am overstating the case, but I honestly consider internal critique to be an important scholarly responsibility.

**VKF:** Tell us a little more about how you have built your path, bridging such distant and different places. How did you end up in the United States and then in Ireland? What were the sentiments and conjunctures that led you to move to these specific countries? Would it be appropriate to suggest that this trajectory mirrors different moments of the discipline, both in India and at the international level?

**CM:** My trajectory has involved a great deal of ricocheting, from one specific moment in a particular anthropological tradition to a quite different moment in another. I was trained primarily in British social anthropology at the Delhi School of Economics and then in the four fields of American anthropology at the New School for Social Research. My subsequent professional career has been based at the only Department of Anthropology in the Republic of Ireland.

It is hard to convey just how electrifying it was to arrive at a maverick institution like the New School for my doctoral education, but I will try. I immediately signed on for courses with William Roseberry, whose theoretical concerns were thrillingly compatible with mine, though they drew on fieldwork and historical research in Latin America, a world completely unknown to me. I was privileged to have access to him as my PhD advisor until his tragic and untimely death. The feminist anthropologist Rayna Rapp, who had been a member of my doctoral committee, was kind enough to chair the committee after Bill's death. She was and is the kind of exemplary teacher and mentor that I would hope to become one day. Peter Worsley and Talal Asad were visiting professors in the Department of Anthropology in my first year. Within a month of my arrival in New York, there was a symposium at the New School on “The Agenda for Radical History.” The speakers were Eric Hobsbawm, E. P. Thompson, Perry Anderson, and Christopher Hill. Our dean described it as “an Anglo-Marxist invasion of Manhattan.” I met Perry Anderson in Dublin some time ago and was delighted to find that he too remembered that event fondly decades later.

I followed my Irish husband to Ireland in 2003 and was fortunate enough to find a position immediately in the only Department of Anthropology in the Republic, at Maynooth University. Maynooth was also the home institution for an old friend from New York, the literary scholar Joe Cleary, whom I had met in graduate school, when he was working on his doctorate with Edward Said at Columbia University. Once he was back in Maynooth, he had started a Marxian reading group called “Red Stripe,” and joining the group was one of the major draws when my husband and I began considering a move to Ireland. Over the thirteen years I have spent here, “Red Stripe” has been an important source of intellectual sustenance. I realize that I am talking about influences that do not necessarily correspond with shifts and flows within our own discipline, but they have been crucial to my intellectual formation as an anthropologist.

**VKF:** How do you describe—or what are your memories regarding—your academic training in India? You studied at the University of Delhi, a premier institution in India. Who were the most remarkable professors at the time?

**CM:** My undergraduate degree was in economics, at St. Stephen's College at the University of Delhi. We were lucky in that our BA (Honors) Economics curriculum had been designed by radical political economists in the late 1970s. It provided a thorough grounding in Marxian

economics, which still stands me in good stead in the anthropological political economy I now pursue.

Disillusioned with the mainstream neoclassical economics being taught at the master's level at the Delhi School of Economics, I switched to the master's program in sociology there. The Department of Sociology at the Delhi School was home to several well-known anthropologists at the time: Andre Beteille, Veena Das, Amitav Ghosh (now known mainly for his fiction). It was there that I finally realized that I wanted to focus principally on anthropology.

**VKF:** As a young student you attended the International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences in Delhi in 1978, which was a landmark in the history of Indian anthropology and the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES). On the one hand, it consolidated Delhi as the new prestigious center of Indian social sciences, and on the other hand, it was decisive in ensuring a new place for Indian social sciences and its scholars inside the IUAES. What are your memories of that conference?

**CM:** I was a schoolgirl when I briefly visited the IUAES Congress at Vigyan Bhavan in New Delhi. It was the first international conference I had ever attended. My sense of the momentousness of that gathering probably has a lot to do with the high regard I have always had for the IUAES.

While she was in Delhi for the IUAES Congress, I had the opportunity to meet Professor Scarlett Epstein from the University of Sussex, who knew my father. We spoke about my plans to study economics in college after graduating from school, and indeed I did go on to do so. She talked about her own journey from economics to social anthropology, and how her training in economics had affected and enriched her anthropological work. It is astonishing that she found time for such a detailed conversation with an awkward teenager and perhaps telling also that I went on to make exactly the same journey from economics to social anthropology several years later.

## World Anthropologies

**VKF:** You have been working in Ireland for more than a decade now, and you have contributed to some debates held in this World Anthropologies section of the *American Anthropologist* on the past and future of Irish anthropology (see Mathur [2015](#)). From the perspective of traditional disciplinary divisions, Irish anthropology is a so-called peripheral anthropological tradition (as are Indian, Brazilian, and many other communities of anthropology). Nevertheless, new critiques and dialogues have been challenging such traditional hierarchies. What can self-proclaimed central traditions learn from this ongoing rearrangement and, more specifically, from the peripheral traditions you are most familiar with, such as the Irish and Indian ones?

**CM:** In the two peripheral contexts I know best, India and Ireland, anthropology has had rather precarious institutional standing, as it does in many other postcolonial societies. There are few anthropology departments in universities in both countries, and anthropologists tend to be employed elsewhere, often in sociology departments. This institutional marginality can result in powerful work along the edges of anthropology. To cite just two of many examples, I am thinking of Amita Baviskar's writings, which grew out of her involvement with environmental social movements in India. Or Seamas O'Siochain's current research into the rundale system of farming and social organization in the west of Ireland in the nineteenth



century, which builds on his lifelong interests in historical anthropology, and now has him collaborating with sociologists, historians, and agricultural scientists.

Hegemonic anthropologies have begun to take an interest in peripheral traditions since the “world anthropologies” critique and the consequent institutional developments, such as the establishment of the World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA), its journal *Deja Lu* (Already Read), and indeed this section in the *American Anthropologist*. There is no downside to this rearrangement, because it allows increased access to the truly exciting anthropologies flourishing across the world.

**VKF:** The World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA) has been an important part of your recent professional activity. In May 2016 you were confirmed as the new chair of the WCAA, after being secretary and, before that, delegate of the Anthropological Association of Ireland (AAI) at the WCAA. What are the main roles and challenges for the WCAA today?

**CM:** The Anthropological Association of Ireland (AAI) had become a member of the World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA) just before I was elected as the AAI chair in 2010, so I served as AAI's delegate to the WCAA for two years. I became the WCAA secretary in 2012 and have just begun my tenure as the WCAA chair this year.

As you know, the WCAA grew out of the “world anthropologies” movement, an intellectual challenge to the long-standing dominance of Anglo-American anthropology and the sidelining of anthropological traditions from elsewhere. Founded in 2004, the WCAA now consists of more than fifty national, regional, and international anthropological associations from all continents.

It seems rather paradoxical to say this about an organization that is represented by fifty-odd chairs and presidents of anthropological associations from around the world, but the WCAA is a deeply subversive project. It disrupts business as usual in our discipline because it has established itself as a forum where representatives from marginal and dominant world regions, and marginal and dominant anthropological traditions, meet on an equal footing.

A key WCAA initiative is the journal *Deja Lu*, which republishes significant articles selected and sent in by editors of anthropological journals worldwide. Swimming against the tide of commercial academic publishing, *Deja Lu* provides an expanded readership for writings that may otherwise have gone unnoticed internationally.

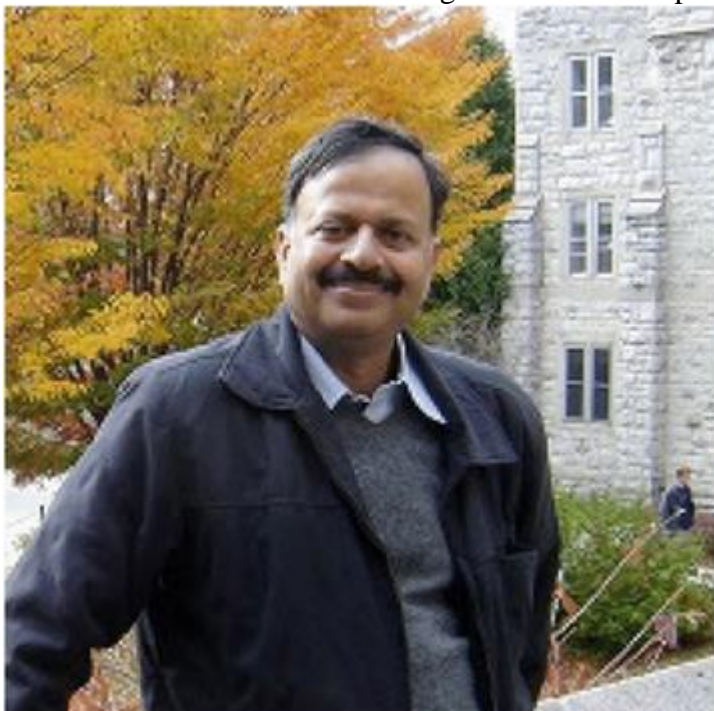
A more recent initiative is the Global Survey of Anthropological Practice (GSAP), a research project that is attempting to uncover the true face of the anthropological profession today. Where are anthropologists employed in different parts of the world? What are the institutional and political contexts in which contemporary anthropology is being practiced? The WCAA is uniquely positioned to gather this information through its member associations, all of which collect some baseline data about their membership. An established worldwide professional community, the WCAA has reimagined itself as a large-scale international research network for the purposes of this project, and indeed as a research tool itself. The GSAP will also pinpoint the challenges we face in common as anthropologists across the world and the issues on which it is necessary for us to stand together.

**VKF:** Recently, WCAA and the IUAES communities voted for a formalized collaboration between the two institutions. Why is this alliance important for global anthropology today?

**CM:** For the past three years, the WCAA and the International Union for Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES), as the two major global bodies representing anthropology, have been trying to establish an ever-closer partnership to better advocate for the many voices of anthropology. As the result of the recent vote by WCAA member associations and the IUAES membership, the two bodies are coming together to form a single bicameral organization. Provisionally called the World Anthropological Union (WAU), this organization will have separate WCAA and IUAES chambers, thereby safeguarding the interests, the historical achievements, and the distinctiveness of the two bodies. It is an exciting juncture for both the WCAA and the IUAES, and indeed for our discipline. We have already begun working together on substantive matters alongside this formal process. For example, following up on an urgent concern identified by the WCAA's advisory board, IUAES president Faye Harrison and I jointly moderated an open session on “Anthropological Fieldwork and Risk in a Violent World” at the recent IUAES Inter-Congress at Dubrovnik. We hope to further the conversation regarding this critical issue at the next IUAES Inter-Congress in Ottawa, focusing on its implications for research ethics.

**VKF:** In August 2016 you attended the thirtieth Brazilian Congress of Anthropology in Joao Pessoa, where you also participated in discussions about the future of the world anthropologies project. Furthermore, the next IUAES Conference will be held in 2018 in Brazil, in Florianopolis, so I would like to know what your impressions are of Brazilian anthropology's weight in the new global dialogue and its institutional practices within the anthropological community.

**CM:** It was a pleasure and a privilege to participate in the meeting of one of the largest anthropological associations in the world. I have always found it inspiring that anthropologists in Brazil have the kind of public profile that economists have elsewhere, that they are frequently called upon by the national media to comment on the issues of the day. This stems from their long decades of committed work in the field and the university, not simply from the adroitness of their communications strategies. It is also the reason why Brazilian anthropologists and the ABA, their association, find themselves targeted by powerful right-wing forces. I have great admiration for the courage of these colleagues and continue to look forward to hearing their voices and perspectives in a global context.



### Figure 3.

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Dr. Soumendra Mohan Patnaik is professor of anthropology at the University of Delhi, India, from which he obtained his MPhil and PhD in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He is the founder of a chapter in India of Anthropology Without Borders (ASF). He has been the president of the Indian Anthropological Association (IAA); the chair of the Commission for Anthropology, Public Policy and Development Practice of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES); and a representative of the IAA at the World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA). He has been an advisor to the government of Nagaland in India and to various international NGOs in South Asia. His numerous publications examine the complex connections between development, displacement, indigenous identities, and public policies. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

## SOUMENDRA MOHAN PATNAIK

### Research Topics

**Vinicius Kauê Ferreira (VKF):** For more than twenty-five years, your work has been devoted to the analysis of so-called development projects in India and how they affect traditional groups in rural and tribal areas. I would like you to explain what the term “development” means in the field of international politics and, on the other side, what an anthropological view of this should be? What are we talking about when we discuss development projects?

**Soumendra Mohan Patnaik (SMP):** The term “development” is highly ambiguous. Economists and political scientists attempt to understand the phenomenon by analyzing quantitative variables with rigorous statistical methods at the level of the nation-state or groups of nation-states. International policy discourse centers on the comparison of the political, economic, and social processes of developing countries and regions, using economic indicators such as gross national product (GNP), gross domestic product (GDP), per capita income, and growth rate.

While such indicators may reflect cumulative growth, they do not reveal anything about distributive aspects of growth. Such a notion of development in fact widens the gap between rich and poor, unleashing further exclusion and marginalization. Anthropologists’ emphasis on more qualitative indicators elucidate people’s perceptions of their living situations. An anthropological understanding of development clearly conveys that development projects designed without taking into account the locally felt needs and future aspirations of the community may not yield desirable results.

Development projects are designed to achieve certain specific objectives through careful planning and execution within a stipulated time and monetary budget. However, development projects are also fraught with structural constraints, including overreliance on donors, external resources, and technical assistance; a limited sense of local ownership of the project; and poor integration and coordination between different stakeholders, such as governments, NGOs, private sector partners, et cetera. There has been ample evidence that many development projects result in the destruction of the sociocultural fabric of local communities. In the absence of downward accountability, many development projects ultimately reinforce existing power dynamics. The funding agencies are usually in a hurry,

which often results in hastily designed or implemented projects that fail to take into account the local political and cultural environment.

**VKF:** Your interests have ranged from traditional infrastructure projects, such as dams and road construction, to tourism as a strategy for local income generation. This shift is also a reflection of concrete transformations in the field of development politics. How has the relationship between official Indian development projects and local communities' claims changed or remained constant across these different kinds of initiatives?

**SMP:** Development initiatives have always been shaped by the larger socioeconomic structure of the state. In the early 1980s development initiatives in India were mainly state sponsored and focused on infrastructure. Income-generation programs were mainly driven by pensions, subsidies, and government assistance for productive economic activities, such as agriculture and raising poultry. As national and global economies have shifted under neoliberal policies, the service sector, including tourism, has assumed prominence. In a recent paper, in 2014, I explored how tourists' consumption of culture drives economic growth in Nagaland, a northeastern state on the international border. Building on Theodor Adorno's (1984; 1993, with Max Horkheimer) ideas, I have argued that when artisanal products and cultural practices enter the marketplace, their aesthetic qualities and organic unity with everyday life are undermined. Recently, international NGOs operating at the global level, such as Future Earth and others, are executing projects linking development issues to more innovative topics, such as the effects of climate change on aesthetic performances and artists' imaginations. Aesthetics could be used to further a development agenda.

**VKF:** You have written about the emergence of NGOs and international foundations and the shrinking of the state. How do these factors change the conception and implementation of development projects, and how have local groups been responding?

**SMP:** The development of indigenous communities in India is undergoing a paradigm shift. After independence in 1947 the responsibility to "develop" them was primarily vested with the national government. In the early 1990s the economic liberalization facilitated the rapid flow of international aid to developing nations like India. This led to the proliferation of NGOs doing development work (Patnaik and Mehrotra 2010). In public-private partnerships, enshrined as one of the Millennium Development Goals, the state delegates the execution of the projects to local NGOs.

The fruits of development are not reaching indigenous communities. This has instilled a sense of deprivation among them, often leading to violence. Many of the tribal areas in central India are conflict ridden due to the influence of Maoist ideology. The state machinery is conspicuous by its absence in the "red corridor" areas of the central Indian belt. The shrinking of the state is reflected in many areas. Elections to local bodies are not held for decades, there are few takers of government jobs, and government schools remain shut for years, all pointing towards nonfunctioning government institutions. Further, because of the difference in approach between the government and the NGOs, the latter being more empathetic towards poor and marginalized, there is a perceptible variation in relation to peoples' response towards both as the initiators of change. Co-option of NGOs is also leading to depoliticization, and NGOs are not able to resist state actions that are not necessarily helpful to the poor.

**VKF:** Do you envisage global patterns in the way development projects have been understood and implemented by both states and nongovernmental institutions, or is it a rather fragmented and locally shaped phenomenon? Can we see convergences between distant and different places such as South Asia and, for instance, Latin America?

**SMP:** There is both convergence and divergence. International donors have created a culture of implementation and monitoring that standardizes global development practice. This culture has its own vocabulary, opaque terms like “inclusive growth,” “good governance,” “sustainable development,” “accountability,” and “social equity,” which can be heard in both Latin America and South Asia.

Development practice is also different in Latin America and South Asia in many ways. In South Asia a “participatory approach” has been an integral part of “community development” initiatives, and communities are deeply connected to the wider political processes of the region. In Latin America the participatory approach is still nascent and “community development” has rarely been a part of the larger development project. Infrastructural development of urban and rural communities has dominated the agenda. Long-drawn ethnic conflicts combined with poor governance have further weakened the state apparatus. Democracy has a long way to go before it becomes vibrant and strong in Latin America.

**VKF:** Your first publication on development as an anthropological question dates back to the late 1980s. You argued that development issues were still a very marginalized topic among anthropologists. Has the situation changed since then? Does contemporary anthropology give development its due nowadays?

**SMP:** Yes, in the early 1980s development issues were relatively marginalized topics among anthropologists. Since then, the sociopolitical situation has changed. Development with participation became the buzzword in the 1990s. The neoliberal model of development has caused massive displacement and marginalization, mainly of indigenous communities. However, these dynamics have also thrown open the gates for dissenting voices and protest movements across the country. Anthropologists in India are deeply concerned about these emerging issues in development and have been raising their voices at national and international fora. In one of my new publications (2016), I make mention of these issues gaining importance in contemporary anthropology.

**VKF:** In light of the increasing number of NGOs and public and private institutions involved in development, what is the intellectual and political role of the anthropologist?

**SMP:** The development projects of the contemporary world are being administered by a team of experts from different disciplines. Anthropologists are beginning to play significant roles as consultants and advisors to projects in tourism, disaster management, climate change, and women's empowerment. I was an advisor to the government of Nagaland in 2004–2005, working with a team of experts to develop sustainable tourism development policy for Nagaland. I also worked as a consultant to Action Aid International in Sri Lanka (in 2006 and 2008) and Nepal (in 2007) on post-tsunami reconstruction and disaster-mitigation programs, respectively. Involvement of anthropologists in policymaking is a welcome trend, but it has its own risks, challenges, and limitations. Anthropologists continuously face moral and ethical dilemmas in such consulting work (Patnaik [2013](#)).



**VKF:** In more recent publications you have employed the notion of “experiential health” in order to explore the relation between displacement and health among the Korwa, an indigenous community of central India. What are the main findings of this research? Could we extend those reflections to other contemporary kinds of displacement?

**SMP:** Displaced from their homes four decades ago, the Korwa, an indigenous community of central India, still describe their displacement from hilly forest to lowland villages in terms of deprivation of health. They complain of fever, aches, fatigue, and frail bodies. My coauthor, Dr. Mokshika Gaur (Gaur and Patnaik [2011](#)) at the National University of Singapore, and I see this as the loss of experiential health, attributed to alienation from the forest. In our research the Korwa maintained a sharp contrast between the “health generating” attributes of forest life and the “health threatening” miseries of current wage labor economy. Using a liminality framework, we understood the health experiences of the displaced Korwa as an embodiment of their social and material conditions of existence.

The question of health is not limited to the body but extends beyond it to the environments that shape experience. We can extend this insight to other kinds of displacement and involuntary resettlement, such as people affected by natural disasters, as well as mining and other state interventions.

#### Trajectory

**VKF:** How did you get interested in development as a student? Please talk about your formative years and how your academic training in India has led you to this area of study. Who were the most influential figures during your formative years?

**SMP:** I graduated from the small-town Khallikote College, affiliated with Berhampur University of Odisha, on the east coast of India in 1981. As anthropology majors, we were required to conduct a team ethnography among an indigenous community. My team was taken to the most underdeveloped district of Koraput, where a multipurpose hydroelectric river dam was being constructed. We were fortunate to have an inspiring teacher, Dr. Geetanjali Nayak, as a fieldwork supervisor, who assigned me the topic of marriage among the Paraja. A group of villagers came to our camp and registered their protest against the government's decision to construct a dam there, which would lead to the submergence of vast tracts of tribal land, including villages and agricultural fields. Our teacher said that because we were from an educational institution and not from the government, we could not really do anything for them. The atmosphere was charged with tension, apprehension, and collective insecurity. It had a lasting impact on me, and I returned to the area for my doctoral research in 1986.

When I returned, I found people had reconciled with the idea of a river dam in their area. Even I became optimistic that maybe the construction project could arrive at a balance between people's aspirations and the national imperatives for growth and development. My exposure to kinship studies created a sound theoretical grounding for understanding the manner in which the social structure of local communities respond to exteriorly designed development projects.

My thesis examined the structural response of an uprooted community to the phenomena of displacement over time. The trend in Indian social science has always been to exaggerate the analytical separation between theoretical and applied research. Most professors in prestigious and elite institutions of India would look down upon you if you worked on a topic of applied



nature. At the same time, most development professionals are skeptical of university professors whose work reflects great theoretical sophistication. This is precisely what I have tried to bridge all through my career.

Professors J. D. Mehra, J. S. Bhandari, and D. K. Bhattacharya left profound impressions during my formative years. J. D. Mehra's classes were hypnotizing. As a student, initially we always thought that he taught us everything under the sun but anthropology. However, as time passed, we could appreciate that he taught us nothing but anthropology, but did not follow the classical vocabulary and imageries of the discipline. He was an unconventional teacher, strongly influenced by Clifford Geertz in his conceptualization of culture, its vibrancies, and its ambiguities.

J. S. Bhandari was fascinated by empiricism and structuralism in anthropology. He never subscribed to populism in anthropology but rather preferred a balanced and scientific approach to issues of human existence. He always encouraged his students to participate in workshops and ethnographic studies conducted by government agencies like All India Radio (AIR) in New Delhi, Administrative Staff College of India (ASCI) in Hyderabad, and Indian Space Research Organizations (ISRO) in Ahmedabad, which instilled a great sense of curiosity to examine the presence and role of anthropology in national bodies. J. S. Bhandari was known for his sharp critical mind and his ability to deconstruct any thesis that his students would come up with. The memory of my thesis chapters falling flat in no time once he would start reading them is still fresh in my mind.

D. K. Bhattacharya truly reflected the spirit of integration in anthropology. Having studied biological anthropology and archaeology, he also pursued his keen interest in social anthropology. He believed that contemporary ethnography could be made more meaningful if situated against the backdrop of history. He also maintained that running after “isms” or theory without being equipped with sufficient data and academic maturity could be disastrous for a neophyte in anthropology.

Besides these three, who were my direct teachers, I was influenced by the works of Professors S. C. and Leela Dube. S. C. Dube also wrote in his mother tongue, Hindi, and produced many powerful, award-winning texts. His advice to me to write in my mother tongue, Odiya, is something that I have yet to execute.

My wife, Nilika Mehrotra, an anthropologist trained at the University of Delhi and now a professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University, has been a collaborator in ideas and academics. She worked with women's groups and later on disability, development, and policy issues. Discussions with her have been fruitful and often shaped our research mutually.

**VKF:** You did your academic training at the University of Delhi in the 1980s and 1990s, which was a period of significant transformations inside India's social sciences. One of the landmarks of that moment is perhaps the Mandal Commission Report and the subsequent reservation policies benefiting historically marginalized groups at the university. Such transformations have been an object of much controversy inside India's social sciences and are today the scapegoat for many cases of casteism at the university level. What are your memories of those days? How would you describe the transformations that have taken place since then?

**SMP:** Yes, the 1980s and 1990s were periods of significant transformation in Indian society, captured well by India's social sciences. The Indian economy was witnessing neoliberal

changes and the market was opening up a structure of occupational and livelihood opportunities for the youth. The Mandal Commission Report was tabled in parliament in the first week of August 1990. The University of Delhi had just opened after the summer break, and I still remember agitated students boycotting classes, organizing *dharnas* (sit-ins), engaging in protest marches, and participating in rallies in opposition to the Mandal Commission Report. Social anthropologists in my department were critical of anti-Mandal protestors, maintaining that the demands of the lower classes were just and that upper-caste students did not want give up their privilege.

It brought a new generation of lower-caste communities to the forefront of India's politics, sparking much controversy. The protests turned violent when the students began to self-immolate. Two University of Delhi students died in such acts of protest. However, while the north was boiling, the whole of south India was relatively peaceful, maybe because of the historic roots of anti-Brahmin movements there.

The Mandal Commission recommendations had three implications. For the first time in Indian history, socially and economically marginalized classes were recognized. Secondly, by identifying the oppression of Muslims and Christians, the Mandal Commission gave rise to a new alliance across religious lines. Last, affirmative action became a cornerstone of public policy. However, implementation has been uneven.

These events appear to have reinforced identity politics in the contemporary academic world, especially on university campuses, where caste identities are negotiated, contested, and consolidated in everyday interactions among students, faculty, and staff. Though universities are supposedly secular and free spaces, marginalized sections of Indian society feel new contours of discrimination today, still based on caste. Dalit students continue to be excluded. Because knowledge production favors English-speaking, techno-savvy urban students, Dalit and tribal students feel disconnected.

**VKF:** You have been president of the Indian Anthropological Association since 2001. What were the main challenges you handled during your tenure?

**SMP:** I must confess that initially I became president of the Indian Anthropological Association (IAA) not by choice but by accident. My teacher, Professor J. S. Bhandari, was elected president in 2000 but died while in office in 2001. I was one of the vice presidents at the time, and Professor Probodh Kumar Bhowmick of Calcutta University was the senior vice president. He was asked to take over but unfortunately also passed away within a few months. The executive committee then named me acting president. The association was in a very dismal state. The publication schedule of *Indian Anthropologist*, the journal of the Indian Anthropological Association, was delayed by two years. Association activities were slowed by inertia. We had no financial resources. The association had a debt of nearly US\$2,000. The membership list was not up to date, and young scholars were unable to connect to the association. The constitution of the Indian Anthropological Association was not equipped to deal with the emerging challenges facing the discipline.

When I became president, we sought to address these challenges both at the level of the association and at the level of the discipline as a whole in India. To overhaul the association, we appointed a constitutional review committee to look into the then pressing needs and come up with a proposal for revision. Thankfully, this proposal was later accepted by the general body of IAA.

At that time, the image of the discipline in India was poor. Anthropologists were not being considered for high-level government positions. The IAA wrote letters to convince the national leadership of the relevance of anthropological insight and knowledge, especially with regard to the development sector. IAA made an attempt to bring policymakers, academic anthropologists, and development practitioners together to help them understand the interdisciplinary nature of anthropological inquiry.

## World Anthropologies

**VKF:** You are the chair of the Commission on Anthropology, Public Policy and Development Practice of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES). What is, in your view, the role of this commission and the IUAES regarding the debates on public policies in a contemporary world?

**SMP:** The study of policy is a legitimate field of anthropological inquiry at the global level and, therefore, holds promise for the future of anthropology, especially in the countries where economists and political scientists monopolize policy studies. The idea of the current IUAES Commission on Anthropology, Public Policy and Development Practice is not only that we should build up an anthropology engaged in policy ethnographies, but also that we need to create a network of scholars, academicians, development practitioners, and civil-society leaders to influence public policies. It is important to know how the poor and excluded communities experience the impact of a policy at the receiving end of social inequality and asymmetry.

The recently launched World Social Science Report (2016) published by UNESCO and the International Social Science Council (ISSC) also stresses the need for deepening our understanding of diverse experiences of inequality in a comparative framework, especially in the context of local and global interconnections. The commission needs to identify themes cutting across the boundaries of other IUAES commissions and create a meaningful dialogue in a transdisciplinary manner informed by anthropological insights. At the May 2017 IUAES Inter-Congress in Ottawa, this commission focused on multiscalar water crisis and governance, drawing on a transnational perspective and working jointly with the Commission on Anthropology and Environment in close collaboration with the McMaster Water Network from McMaster University in Canada. The commission is in its formative stage, trying to create a community of scholars and development practitioners who could emerge as a viable group influencing public policies and governance, especially concerning the marginal and excluded groups of the Global South.

**VKF:** You are a member of Anthropology Without Borders (Antropólogos sem Fronteiras, or ASF, in Portuguese), a movement founded in 2013 in Brazil under the auspices of the World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA). You have recently founded a chapter of ASF in India. What kind of works has ASF developed since its foundation?

**SMP:** In fact, the idea to form Anthropology Without Borders came up in 2010 during a discussion in the biennial meeting of the World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA) held at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. The question was how the WCAA could engage the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. I still remember one of the statements Professor Virginia Dominguez made during the discussion: "It is not sufficient to identify the issues which we care for, but we also need to do something for them." The sentence was very touching, and I felt that it echoed my inner voice. I was keen to volunteer, but hesitated because I was new to the WCAA. Perhaps Virginia could

sense this and asked, “What about you, Soumendra?” I jumped at the idea of joining the WCAA Task Force that would discuss whether or not to establish something like Anthropology Without Borders. Virginia Dominguez was elected chair of the task force and she asked Chandana Mathur to join her as cochair. After numerous meetings of the task force via Skype, the group decided to establish it formally in Brazil, but to make it clear that it was for all anthropologists to join and not only for Brazilian anthropologists. But we named it Antropólogos sem Fronteiras (ASF), its name in Portuguese, to avoid confusion with AWB, a pro-apartheid organization in South Africa.

The task before me at a later point was to create a similar network more suitable to the Indian situation. So, in 2013, the Indian Anthropological Association decided to set up a network of professional anthropologists as well as like-minded civil-society organizations from India and South Asia under the name of Anthropology Without Borders. We identified our goal much like ASF (in Brazil), namely that we would serve as the link between groups seeking anthropological specialists and anthropologists who can act as critical readers and reviewers of reports and policy documents. The anthropologists offer expert advice to communities at no cost. The objective is to work for the community, give something back, inculcate the spirit of voluntary work in students, stress practical experience, and focus on working on development and empowerment projects. The idea is also to make anthropological knowledge accessible to people regardless of national, regional, or social boundaries, and to foster a feeling of solidarity between anthropologists and members of local communities.

**VKF:** The work recently developed by institutions such as the IUAES, the WCAA, and ASF reflects key transformations at the core of global anthropology today. Despite some resistance, we are seeing a growing consensus among anthropologists all over the world about challenging traditional hierarchies between the so-called central and peripheral anthropological traditions. What can global anthropology, and especially central anthropologies, learn from this ongoing reconfiguration?

**SMP:** The World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA) addresses the question of world anthropology by creating a global network through effective communication among national anthropologies. The growth of the world anthropologies movement, with its strong regional and national networks, has contributed significantly to the empowerment of scholars on the peripheries.

The traditional hierarchies between so-called central and peripheral anthropological traditions manifest differently across regions. In South Asia, for instance, anthropology has been denied the status of an independent discipline and has been subsumed under the discipline of sociology. This has had implications for graduate students in anthropology in South Asia—their scholarly identities, perceived expertise, and job opportunities. The graduate students of anthropology in India have felt that they are rarely considered for teaching positions in sociology or even development studies. On the contrary, students of economics, political science, and social work are welcome in development and policy studies, and obtain jobs managing NGOs in different parts of India. Anthropology has been marginalized in terms of its real potential in these fields.

The presence of the WCAA and ASF in India over the last few years has invigorated the discipline and enriched communication among scholars from India and abroad. India's participation in two of the WCAA task forces—one on ethics and the other on advocacy and outreach activities—has proved very useful. Young scholars are taking a keen interest in the

activities of the task forces. The idea is to create future leadership in anthropology that is equipped with the skills necessary to carry out a dialogue with the leaders of world anthropologies, not in an asymmetrical or paternalistic idiom but in an empowered and egalitarian space where the dialogue between the local/national anthropologies and the hegemonic anthropologies is carried out based on mutuality, respect for difference, and dignity.

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