

National Seminar on Tribal Communities and Future of Museums

Date: 23.05.2025.

Venue: Cauvery Hall, 5th mile



A National Seminar on **“Tribal Communities and Future of Museums”** was held on 23rd May, 2025 at Cauvery Hall, 5th mile, organized by the Department of Anthropology, in collaboration with the Tribal Research and Training Centre (TRI&TC) under the Social Welfare Department, Government of Sikkim. The seminar included inaugural session which incorporated, inauguration of Volume 7:Issue 1 of **“Mountain Hues”** departmental student newsletter, by Prof. Abhijit Dutta, Vice-Chancellor, Sikkim University, Ms. Sarika Pradhan, (Secretary, Social Welfare Department, Govt of Sikkim), Prof. Satyananda Panda (Dean, School of Human Sciences, Sikkim University), Dr. Kaustuv Saikia (Key Note Speaker and District Museum Officer, Diphu Museum, Assam). The second issue of the Departmental **“Wall Magazine”**, was also inaugurated by Dr. Kaustuv Saikia, Prof. Ambika Dhaka (Professor and Head, Department of History, Sikkim University), Dr. Sangay Diki Bhutia (Project Officer, TRI, Social Welfare Department, Govt of Sikkim). The programme commenced with important speeches by all the dignitaries, followed by three technical sessions exploring museums and its various inter-sectionalities.





Inaugural Session

The seminar began with the ceremonial lighting of the lamp by dignitaries. This was followed by the university invocation song. Prof. K.R Rama Mohan, Head of the Department of Anthropology, welcomed the guests and participants. Delivering his welcome and introductory speech Prof. K.R Rama Mohan gave a brief account on the collaboration of Department of Anthropology with the Tribal Research Institute under the Social Welfare Department, Government of Sikkim. Further he focused on the theme of the seminar “Tribal Communities and the Future of Museum”, talking about the very concept of museums ,Stressed the significant aspect of museums which lies in its ‘Publicality’. In addition, he pointed out the major issues for the future of museums given the stratified nature of the Indian society how can museums be neutral, inclusive and accessible or all.

Museums need to be a Collaborative Space for Dialogue.



Following the welcome speech, Prof. Satyananda Panda, Dean, School of Human Sciences, Sikkim University also delivered on this occasion focusing on the importance of museums including to change the perspectives regarding any particular community specially the tribal communities who make up about 8.6% of population in India with distinct culture and art forms.



The inaugural address was delivered by Prof. Abhijit Dutta, Vice-Chancellor, Sikkim University, emphasized the crucial role of museums in preserving and showcasing India’s cultural heritage, history, and art. He laid focus on the important purpose of any museum was to connect to people, something that relates with the audience. This can be achieved with more inclusive and experiential installations. He described museums as vital educational spaces that promote learning, intercultural understanding, and appreciation of diverse traditions. He expressed his appreciation to the Social Welfare Department for the collaboration and

looked forward to future joint initiatives with the TRI&TC and Department of Anthropology, Sikkim University.



Ms. Sarika Pradhan, Secretary, Social Welfare Department, Government of Sikkim highlighted the significance of the gathering in recognizing and honoring the profound contributions of tribal communities. She focused on museums that reflect the voices, histories, and wisdom of indigenous peoples, not just through preservation, but through rightful representation. She referenced the recently inauguration of the Tribal Research Institute and Training Centre 15th November 2024, on the occasion of Janjatiya Gaurav Diwas 2024, and their vision in establishing a museum as part of their institute. A tribal museum committed and strengthened through

collaborative research with the various communities of Sikkim and the Department of Anthropology. She requested Sikkim University to facilitate and enhance this valuable partnership in the future.

By the end of the inaugural program, the dignitaries and guests visited the display from Ethnographic museum cum Archeology laboratory and fieldwork photo gallery installed in Cauvery Hall. Following this there was the inauguration of the Department Wall Magazine.





The Keynote Address was delivered by Dr. Kaustuv Saikia, (District Museum Officer, Diphu Museum), addressing the topic “Breaking Glass Cages: Tribal communities and the decolonization of museums of India’s, Northeast”. He set the tone for the day’s deliberations by emphasizing the need for museums to become more inclusive, participatory, and representative of India’s rich tribal heritage. He discussed the process of repatriation, which is actively under way in many parts of the world including the Northeast of India in Nagaland. Furthermore, talking about the history of

museums which stemmed from political acts and colonialism, stating the examples of Assam state museum formed under the Kanun Anusandan Samithi in its exhibits under the guidance of colonial members like J.P Mills displayed objects showing a visible divide between people from the hills and plain. But the museum is now undergoing a transition keeping in mind the notion of public memory, narratives which is seeing a departure from the colonial shadows, now can interpret their owns histories. He further pointed out problems with many other museums with missing contents, no labels, and no audio visual aid to explain the exhibits. He acknowledged that museums should be more inclusive as an example he talked about the newly established Nothengpi Karbi Hritage Museum in Diphu, Assam where karbi scholars, artists and Karbi community members worked together for all the exhibits and designing of the museum. In the end he stressed that visiting museums as being very important and indulging in dialogues with the curators/officers, so that people and community members could guide the curators or officers if there are any discrepancies from exhibits belonging to their own community.

Technical session 1: Chaired by Dr. Kaustuv Saikia (District Museum Officer, Diphu Museum, Assam)

Presenters:

1. Prof. Ambika Dhaka (Professor and Head, Department of History, Sikkim University)
2. Dr. Manisha Subba (Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Sikkim University)
3. Yashasvi Sharma (Independent Researcher)

Prof. Ambika Dhaka presented her paper “Museum as Living Heritage: Bharat’s Innovative Approach to Preserving the Past and Shaping the Future” where she talked about the evolving landscape of museums as living heritage. Highlighting Bharat’s innovative strides in preservation, from ancient Mesopotamian legacies to modern digital reforms, she emphasized that museums are not mere repositories—they are spaces of interaction, identity, and vision. With references to policy frameworks, technology, and public participation, Prof. Dhaka focused that museums must engage communities, inspire curiosity, and shape the future through inclusive storytelling and innovation.

Dr. Manisha Subba in her presentation “Envisioning Museums as sites of Social Justice” where she reimagines museums as dynamic spaces for social justice, emphasizing their role in fostering critical pedagogy, historical understanding, and inclusive representation. Through educational collaborations

and participatory exhibits, museums can challenge caste, gender, and class inequalities. She highlights the importance of incorporating marginalized voices—including LGBTQ+ identities and refugee testimonies—through experiential learning and community engagement.

Yashasvi Sharma with her presentation on “Safeguarding Sikkim’s Cultural Heritage through Conservation” shed light on the critical role of conservation in safeguarding Sikkim’s cultural heritage. Through insightful examples—from preventive care techniques to community-involved workshops—she emphasized that conservation is not just about preserving objects but about protecting identity and ensuring cultural continuity. Her case study on reorganizing museum collections demonstrated how even simple, well-planned actions can have lasting impacts. Heritage, she reminded us, lives not just in museums but in our homes and everyday practices.

Technical session 2: Chaired by Dr. James Vungjangam Haokip (Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Sikkim University)

Presenters:

1. Rajeshwari Sharma (Assistant Professor, Sanchamaan Limboo Government College, Gyalshing, Sikkim)
2. Monila Limboo (PhD Scholar, Department of Anthropology, Sikkim University)
3. Munmun Chutia (PhD Scholar, Department of Anthropology, Sikkim University)

Rajeshwari Sharma presented “Reconstructing Tribal History: Museums as Sites of Postcolonial Memory” where she examined how museums have evolved from colonial tools of dominance—rooted in Orientalist narratives—into dynamic sites of postcolonial memory. She emphasized the need to decolonize museum spaces by re-contextualizing tribal artifacts, engaging with indigenous communities, and promoting public education. Museums today are not just preservers of heritage but active agents in reconstructing marginalized tribal histories.

Monila Limboo with her paper “The Upsurge of Household Collection/ Museum in the villages of Sikkim” explored the traditional “Sikkimese” homes that are evolving into micro-museums, preserving seeds, tools, and crafts that embody both cultural memory and climate resilience. She emphasized that museums are not neutral spaces, and household collections hold deep historical and intangible value. The rise of such grassroots museums reflects a global shift in heritage preservation, where rural homes become living archives of community identity.

Munmun Chutia presented on “Megaliths as Living Heritage: The Role of Museums of Cultural Perspective” emphasized that megaliths are not just relics of the past but living traditions rooted in nature worship and ancestral memory across Sikkim’s diverse communities. Through her study of 35 villages, she highlighted how museums can preserve and promote awareness of this heritage through education, exhibitions, and community involvement. She stressed that museums must actively engage with living cultures to protect traditions like those of the Lepcha, Bhutia, and Nepali groups.

Technical session 3 chaired by Dr. Rongnyoo Lepcha, Guest Faculty, Sikkim University

Presenters:

1. Satyabrata Sahoo (PhD Scholar, Department of Anthropology, Sikkim University)
2. Ehsan Ali Daar (M.A, Department of Anthropology, Sikkim University)
3. Taba Menia (Guest lecturer, Department of Anthropology, Rajiv Gandhi University, Arunachal Pradesh)
4. Mohan Sharma (PhD Scholar, Department of Geography, Sikkim University)

Satyabrata Sahoo presented on “Are Virtual Reality Museums a Substitute for Traditional Museums?” discussed how virtual reality (VR) museums can blend personal storytelling with cultural authenticity, offering immersive learning experiences. He highlighted ethical challenges in VR design—such as bias, representation, and ownership—and stressed the need for transparency, inclusivity, and community

collaboration. His talk emphasized ethical frameworks to ensure accurate, respectful, and engaging digital cultural representation, envisioning a hybrid future for museums.

Ehsan Ali Daar's presentation "A Home for our Heritage: The need for Community Museums in Kashmir" emphasized the importance of community museums in preserving Kashmir's rich cultural heritage amid conflict, migration, and modern threats. He argued for small, mobile, and pop-up museums rooted in local traditions, crafts, and daily life. By involving schools, NGOs, and artisans, these museums can foster peace, economic support, and self-expression. His vision reimagines museums as inclusive, accessible, and grounded in the lived experiences of the Kashmiri people.

Taba Menia presented "Silent Frames, Forgotten Voices: A Provenance Study of Ursula Graham Bower's Apatani Film" which explored the silent frames and forgotten voices in Ursula Graham Bower's ethnographic films on the Apatani community of Subansiri, Arunachal Pradesh. She critically examined how these visual archives—once part of colonial anthropological projects—are preserved in institutions like the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. Her talk emphasized how labelling and interpretation shape tribal identity, urging for re-contextualization that centers indigenous voices in museum narratives.

And last but not the least Mohan Sharma's presentation focused on the *Akru* landscape within the Idu Mishmi borderscape, exploring its deep connections to animal societies and livestock. He highlighted the intricate relationship between the community's way of life, their environment, and folklore that shapes the cultural meaning of *Akru*. The discussion covered habitat suitability and how objects transition from material artifacts to cultural subjects, emphasizing *Akru* as a living landscape embedded in human geography and storytelling.

The seminar concluded with a comprehensive briefing note summarizing the key presentations and discussions, followed by a Vote of Thanks expressing gratitude to all participants, collaborators, and contributors for making the event a success.

