

## Understanding socio-cultural perspectives empirically

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Anthropological research in and on contemporary India is concerned with the following questions, amongst others- how does a country or society strive for equality for all its citizens be it in health, education and infrastructure? How do we sift through the larger discourse on growth and development and look at how these ideas actually take shape in practice? What meanings and understandings can we gain by looking at the role played by social and cultural factors in our notions about what health and well-being should be or what kind of education our young people should pursue? Differences in class, gender, caste etc, must be taken into account for us to understand the issues thoroughly. As a discipline, anthropology is engaged in asking difficult and challenging questions, keeping at the forefront the people, called 'interlocutors', amongst and with whom research is conducted. It is their voices that are brought to the fore in the 'ethnographic' methods used and in writing. Through immersive fieldwork lasting long periods of time, scholars gain significant knowledge of the ground realities. Ethnographic research methods like 'participant observation' allow for an in-depth understanding of local dynamics.

One of the key requirements of such research is knowing the local language, norms and practices. Research is conducted in a wide variety of settings reflecting the country's diversity. Fieldwork therefore takes place in remote areas, villages, cities, towns, offices, hospitals and schools. Long periods of stay in the field also help in understanding the landscape, and relations with nearby areas. No single 'fieldsite' is seen in isolation. To get a strong and deep sense of the issues involved, it is also important to pay attention to people's interactions with government and non-governmental institutions. In that sense, almost all research is 'multi-sited'. Below we illustrate a few ongoing studies using anthropological theories and methods, and borrowing from other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, making the work inter-disciplinary. A study undertaken by Tekumal Santosh looks at maternal and infant mortality among the Gutti Koya, a Gond Adivasi community. Currently, there are 50,000 Gutti Koya who have moved from Chattisgarh after 2005 to Telangana.



They have poor health indicators due to displacement, land acquisition, unemployment, inadequate health infrastructure and dependency on self-proclaimed 'healers'. Based on 15 months of fieldwork in Kothagudem district, and interviews and observations with women, and other family members, front line health workers (ASHAs and ANMs), 'traditional' health healers (vadda), and Primary Health Care (PHC) staff, this study explored the problems Gutti Koya face in accessing health care due to lack of documents, their beliefs and practices surrounding pregnancy, and health care policies for vulnerable populations. This is reflected in the high rates of mortality among mothers and infants. Challenging the conventional view that 'infertility' is primarily a women's issue, research by Venkatesh Boddu highlights a topic rarely discussed in public discourse, that of men's 'quest for fatherhood' (to paraphrase Marcia Inhorn). Through data collected in fifteen months of fieldwork in rural Telangana, supplemented by insights from biomedical professionals in Hyderabad, the study examines male perceptions of infertility delving into its socio-cultural dimensions—stigma, traditional healing practices, financial hardships, and social exclusion. We investigate how men navigate these challenges, countering the assumption that they are in denial. By exploring the intersection of biomedical treatments and traditional healing, this work provides a holistic understanding of the impact a diagnosis of infertility can have on notions of masculinity, family relationships, and community dynamics in India. Exploring the aspirational imaginaries of young people in Telangana, Shankar Guguloth conducted fieldwork among students from marginalised backgrounds enrolled in government residential schools.

Drawing on 18 months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork from 2022 to 2024, this study engaged Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) methods, including drawing, storytelling, photovoice, and photography, alongside participant observation. The findings suggest that 'aspiration' translates into different things, depending on the kind of school a student is enrolled in, distance from the city, gender, and family's socio-economic conditions. While these students internalize neoliberal ideals of self-making and success, they retain an ethical responsibility for community development and social justice, shaped by their lived experiences of exclusion and systemic disadvantage. All of these studies aim to document our lived experiences in the here and now, concentrating on the social and cultural dynamics underpinning human behaviour. The larger aim is to contribute to efforts made by policy-makers to improve people's lives by providing information from the grassroots, and in their own voice.

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