

News

OBITUARY



Prof. Pooran Chand Joshi
(June 1, 1956- June 20, 2025)

It is with a very heavy heart that I am penning this obituary of my beloved mentor and teacher Prof. Pooran Chand Joshi. On June 20, 2025 at around 1 AM he left us for his heavenly abode. He was 69 years of age. Prof. Joshi retired from service as an officiating Vice-Chancellor of University of Delhi, Pro Vice-Chancellor and Professor of Anthropology on May 31, 2021. His contribution to the field of anthropology is unmatched. He was one of the leading Medical Anthropologist in India and South Asia. He served as Professor of Anthropology in the Delhi University Department of Anthropology from 2003 to 2021.

My association with Prof. Joshi dates back to July 2004 when I joined the department of Anthropology at Delhi University as a Master's student. I still remember that for students in the Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi (DU), Prof. Joshi as a teacher was known for his punctuality and regularity in taking classes. When I was a master's student in the department (2004-06), the general perception about him among the students was that he is a kind of professional who is always completely engrossed in his work, is kind at heart and always ready to help students. He taught diverse ways and locations of doing anthropology that helped in

putting across a very powerful message- that anthropology is not limited to the 'tribal lands' or the so-called 'other.' To a great extent it helped in bridging the gap between the self and other that was created by the colonial anthropology.

Prof. Pooran Chand Joshi was born on June 1, 1956 in the Uttarakhand hills in a village called *Kherakot*. He spent his early childhood in the village. He was educated mostly in government schools and did his higher secondary from Gandhi Memorial Government Boys School, Delhi. His father Pandit Prem Ballabh Joshi worked with the electricity department and his mother Smt. Rewati Devi was a home maker. He is from a very humble economic background. His grandfather and generations above him were engaged in agriculture in Uttarakhand.

It was in the year 1972 that he came to University of Delhi to pursue his Bachelor of Science degree. He was not sure that what courses he will opt for in DU science faculty. He visited the science faculty office which was at that time located in a building where the present day three storied administrative building is constructed. He met a science faculty clerk outside the building and enquired about the courses that were available there. The clerk told him that he can opt for anthropology. He also told him that he can visit the department that was located in the science faculty itself and inquire more about the prospects of the subject.

He went to the department where he met Mr. Kamlesh Guha who was the museum curator of the department at that time. Mr. Guha in his typical Bengali accented English, told him about the subject. He decided to take anthropology and got enrolled in Hans Raj College. He did his B.Sc. honours course, M.Sc., M.Phil. and Ph.D. all from the DU Department of Anthropology. He specialized in the field of Medical Anthropology. He did his Ph.D. under Prof. J.D. Mehra

and his thesis was titled as “Illness, Health and Culture: Dynamics of Therapy in a Central Himalayan Tribe” and was based on one year fieldwork in a village *Silgaon* (pseudonym) of Jaunsar Bawar region of Uttarakhand. After completing his Ph.D. from DU in 1985, he left Delhi as he was appointed as Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology, H.N.B. Garhwal University, Srinagar, Uttar Pradesh (then). He worked there till 1997 and joined as Associate Professor and Head, Department of Medical Anthropology, Institute of Human Behaviour and Allied Science, Delhi where he worked till 2003 before finally joining Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi as a Professor.

Within the holistic frame of anthropology Prof. Joshi's contribution can be located in the fields of social, biological and archaeological anthropology. Epistemologically his orientation was both positivistic and interpretive. He was an ardent believer in the method of triangulation in research. The concept of holism when applied to the methods of data collection, give us a battery of methods that try to investigate social phenomenon from every possible angle. His academic writings include ten books, around ninety research articles, more than fifty chapters in edited books, around fourteen project reports and six reports submitted to the government of India. Besides this he has also written newspaper articles and editorials. His writings can be categorized into four broad themes viz- Health, Religion, Disasters and Environment. His writings also include reflexive accounts of the growth and status of the discipline of social anthropology in general and medical anthropology in particular.

His most important contribution is in the field of medical anthropology. He has extensively written on the issues of tribal health and medicine, an area very close to his heart and also very important for the realization of his academic, professional and personal self. His focus had been on the issues of health seeking behavior, alternative and traditional forms of healing and their contemporary relevance and interaction with the state, democratic polities and global forces, etiologies of disease causation, epidemiology, drug use and mental health. Doing justice to the bio-social nature of medical anthropology, he has also extensively written on biological dimensions, indicators and factors that are influenced by and in turn influences the social realm

of human existence. Such studies focused on for example- the assessment of cardiovascular risk factors among Sunni Muslims in Delhi, prescriber and dispenser's perception about antibiotic use in the case of childhood diarrhea. Another contribution of his is in the form of relocating concepts, and disciplinary ideologies to inhabit new areas like inquiring the status of health in general and child health in particular in a disaster context. Such studies not only create new knowledge but also give new life to earlier concepts in disciplinary history.

A great deal of his writings subscribes to and is directed towards the advocacy for the rights and improvement in the overall condition and quality of life of the most marginalized sections of the society. His relational understanding of the reality is an offshoot of his anthropological training and worldview which is also reflected in his approach towards advocacy and public policy. He contends that in order to undertake advocacy efforts, an integrated and interdisciplinary approach is needed where anthropologists, biotechnologists, pharmacologists, social activists come together to uphold the intellectual property rights of the tribals on their indigenous knowledge. Within this paradigm of advocacy and within the larger anthropological discourse on post-colonial studies, Prof. Joshi strongly believes that agency of the 'tribes' is of utmost importance to realize such goals. According to him the entire process of claiming rights and advocacy should not look like a give-and-take exercise where a hierarchy is set from the very beginning and the agencies responsible for the 'development' act as benevolent '*sahebs*' and the tribals as illiterate and un-interested 'beneficiaries.' He calls for role reversals and de-centering of the entire processes linked to policy and advocacy.

Owing to his contributions in the field of Anthropology, Prof. Joshi has also been awarded with several honors and recognitions. He was the recipient of the Indira Priyadarshini Vriksha Mitra National Award for the year 1987. This award was conferred upon him by an organization called The Friends of Trees in recognition of his environment related work. In the year 2007, he received the Certificate of Honour conferred upon him jointly by the Delhi Psychiatry Society and Psychiatries-Du Monde, France. A plaque

of appreciation was awarded to him by the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Xavier University – Ateneo de Cagayan, Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines in 2008. Again, in the year 2009, he was awarded with Certificate of Appreciation in the IIIrd National PG Convention of the Indian Association of Public Health Dentistry, K.D. Dental College and Hospital, Mathura. He also received a certificate of appreciation for his research on disaster impacts in Asia and Europe by the Faculty of Public Health, University of Indonesia in 2009. Besides these awards and appreciations, Prof. Joshi also had the honour of being a visiting faculty to some of the world's renowned universities like the University of Heidelberg, Germany, Global Forum for Health, Geneva, and University of Hyderabad, India.

Prof. Joshi will be remembered not only as an academic but also as an able administrator. He served as the Head, Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, Pro Vice-Chancellor, University of Delhi and also its officiating Vice-Chancellor. During his tenure as the Vice-Chancellor, India reeled under Covid-19. It was his administrative acumen that steered Delhi University out of this challenging situation. He is also credited with initiating long-pending promotions of teachers in Delhi University colleges and departments. Until his sudden demise he was holding the post of the President, Society for Indian Medical Anthropology (SIMA) headquartered at Mysuru. The idea to form SIMA was germinated in Pune in 1978 when he and Prof. H. K. Bhat were participating in post plenary session on medical anthropology at the Xth International Conference of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences. The society got registered in 1985. Till his last, Prof. Joshi was also associated with the United Indian Anthropology Forum (UIAF) as an Ex-Officio Vice-President of this academic body. He was instrumental in organizing the World Anthropology Congress 2023 that was held in Bhubaneswar, Odisha.

Prof. Joshi's contribution to the discipline is not only within the boundaries of the university lectures and academic publications but it extends to his entire approach towards the knowledge cosmology. Casual conversations with him can give you a very deep insight into the issue under discussion. A very mundane looking event can turn out to be an event of great anthropological importance. His biggest

contribution to the discipline besides generating academic knowledge is in the form of generating human resources who got ample training under him to develop and practice an anthropological vision. He was a thorough fieldworker. He enjoyed doing anthropological fieldwork, going to villages, talking with people and documenting their philosophies.

While on a field trip one can always find Prof. Joshi with his camera. He had a great 'photographic sense' and he always used to tell in definite terms how to use the lens, from what distance to take the picture and which angle and brightness will be best suited to a particular situation. He made ample use of still and video cameras in the field and generated visual field documents. I remember doing a fieldwork with him in *Bahraich* district of Uttar Pradesh on a MICRODIS project related to documenting lives of people affected by recurrent flooding. He used to carry a video camera with himself and documented the lives of people which later-on was converted into a short documentary on flood affected people of *Bahraich*. One of his first documentaries was on the mask dances of the inner Himalayas. He also submitted this documentary film to the Indira Gandhi National Center for Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi. He has to his credit three documentary films namely- Inundated Lives, made on recurrent annual flooding in Bahraich district of Eastern Uttar Pradesh, Safe School, Safe Community, made for the MICRODIS project funded by the European Union and Cyclone Aila: The Cycle of Misery, made on the 2009 cyclone and captures death and destruction caused in the Sundarban Delta. These documentaries were made on the issue of disaster induced hardships among the people and the emerging state-citizen relationships. People's narratives about the disasters form the main focus of the documentaries. The idea is to understand how people make sense of death and destruction caused by natural and human-made events and how public policy in this context facilitates or hinders people resilience and vulnerability reduction. Besides this he was also very much interested in historical and archaeological records and artifacts. His eyes used to lit-up whenever he saw any object/artifact/building having archaeological significance. It was this interest that led him to discover a Paleolithic site in Delhi.

Prof. P. C. Joshi was a very loving and kind hearted

person. He was always ready to help his students and colleagues. He was so knowledgeable about the academic and administrative dimensions that everyone used to go to him whenever they faced any problem. He listened to everyone and did his best to make others comfortable. Although he held top administrative and academic positions but was a very humble and down-to-earth person. He was easily approachable by his students and colleagues. It is these qualities that made him the person he was. He was very popular among his students and colleagues and therefore he will be greatly missed forever. His

demise is a great loss to the Indian academia and specially to the discipline of Anthropology. The void that has been created can never be filled. I extend my deepest and heartfelt condolences to his family and his loved ones.

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Dr Prodyot Gangopadhyay

2 February 1953–2 August 2025

In the first week of August 2025, I received a message from Dr P. Dash Sharma that Dr Prodyot Gangopadhyay has left this mortal world on 2nd August 2025. I was shocked hearing this news. We had long association with Dr Gangopadhyay as a book review editor of *South Asian Anthropologist*. We record with deep sorrow the sudden demise of our associate Dr Prodyot Gangopadhyay.

Dr Gangopadhyay was involved in anthropological research since 1976 after obtaining his Master's degree in anthropology from Calcutta University. Dr Gangopadhyay obtained his Ph.D. degree in the month of February 1988 from Ranchi University under the supervision of Professor P. Dash Sharma. His Ph.D. topic was: *A Study on the Variation of Arterial Pressure among Few Endogamous*

Communities of West Bengal Living Under Different Ecological Conditions." In the Anthropological Survey of India, he was associated with some large-scale projects of the Survey as: The People of India; All India Anthropometric Survey (West Zone); Nutritional Status of Indian Populations; and DNA Polymorphism of Indian Population, among others. After his retirement from the Anthropological Survey of India, he was for some time associated with Indira Gandhi National Open University at Nagpur, as Course Coordinator (Anthropology).

We have lost a soft spoken, diligent researcher of our fraternity, who breathed his last at Nagpur on 2nd August 2025. Our condolences to the bereaved family. May his soul rest in peace in the heavenly abode.

Anil Kishore Sinha
Editor, *South Asian Anthropologist*



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