

One Day National Seminar on
**Socio-Cultural Practices among
The Buddhist Communities of
Himalayan Region and Nearby Areas**
7th February 2026 | ICCR, Kolkata

A Report





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ICCR, Ho Chi Minh Sarani, Kolkata



The Institute of Social and Cultural Studies (ISCS), Kolkata, in collaboration with the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), organized a One-Day National Seminar on “Socio-Cultural Practices among the Buddhist Communities of Himalayan Region and Nearby Areas” on 7 February 2026 in Kolkata. The seminar was conducted as part of the ongoing ICSSR-sponsored project titled “Integral Socio-Cultural Practices among the Buddhist Communities

in Borderland Regions: A study in Sikkim and Selected Districts of Arunachal Pradesh and North Bengal.”

The primary aim of the seminar was to facilitate scholarship that highlights the integral socio-cultural practices of Buddhist communities in the context of contemporary challenges such as globalization, geopolitics, tourism, and cultural transformations in borderland regions.

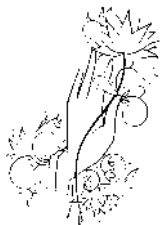
Inaugural Session

The seminar commenced with a Welcome Address by Shri Arindam Mukherjee, Director, ISCS, Kolkata. In his remarks, he emphasized the importance of studying Buddhist socio-cultural practices in India’s borderland regions, underlining

how these communities negotiate tradition and modernity amidst rapid socio-economic changes. He reiterated that such research is crucial for understanding cultural resilience and regional identity in sensitive geopolitical zones.



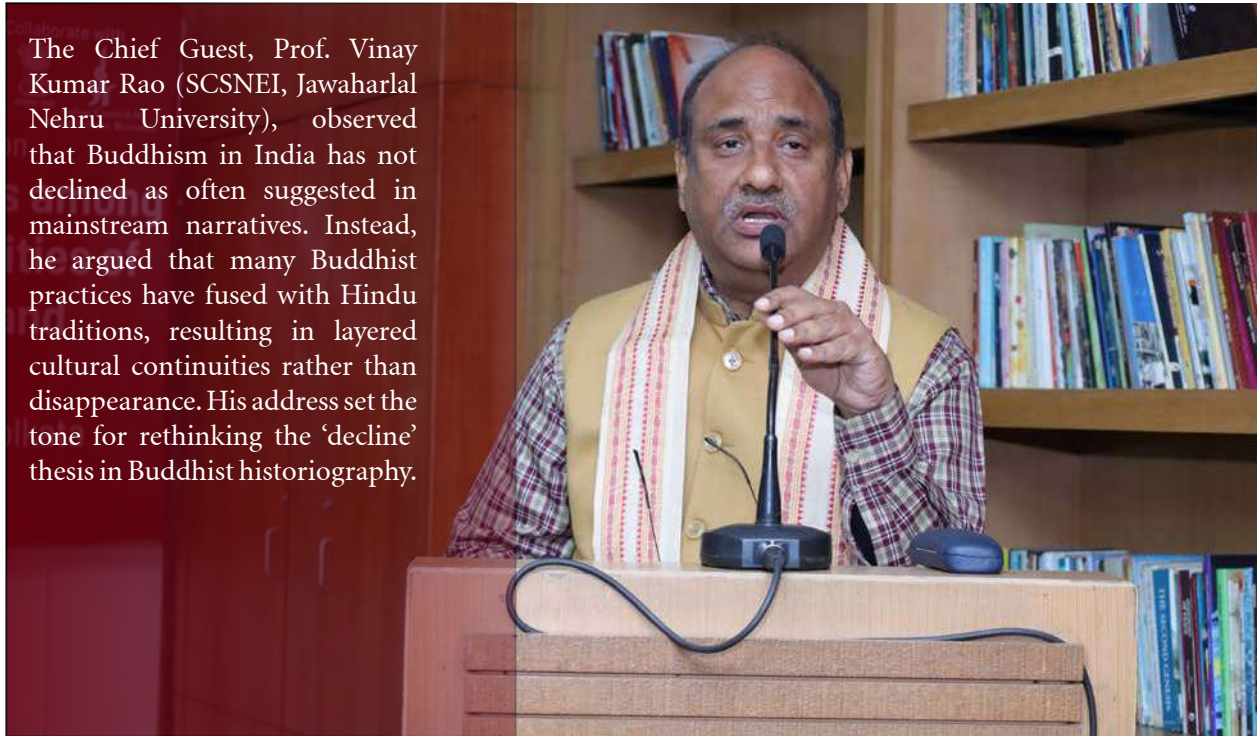
Welcome Speech by Shri Arindam Mukherjee, Director, ISCS, Kolkata



Felicitations to Chief Guest Prof. Vinay Kumar Rao, SCSNEI, JNU

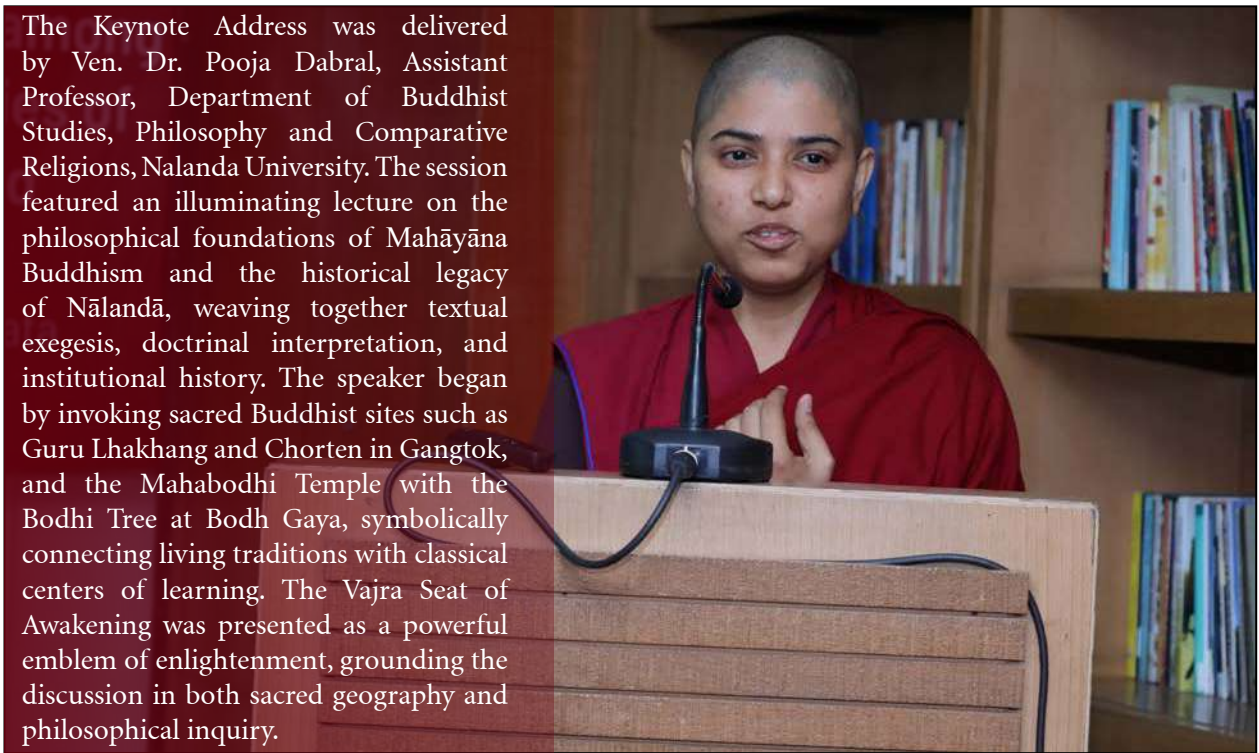


Felicitations to Keynote Speaker Ven. Dr. Pooja Dabral, Assistant Professor, Department of Buddhist Studies, Philosophy and Comparative Religions, Nalanda University



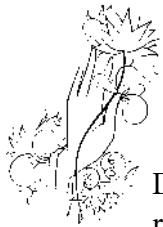
The Chief Guest, Prof. Vinay Kumar Rao (SCSNEI, Jawaharlal Nehru University), observed that Buddhism in India has not declined as often suggested in mainstream narratives. Instead, he argued that many Buddhist practices have fused with Hindu traditions, resulting in layered cultural continuities rather than disappearance. His address set the tone for rethinking the 'decline' thesis in Buddhist historiography.

Speech by Chief Guest Prof. Vinay Kumar Rao, SCSNEI, JNU



The Keynote Address was delivered by Ven. Dr. Pooja Dabral, Assistant Professor, Department of Buddhist Studies, Philosophy and Comparative Religions, Nalanda University. The session featured an illuminating lecture on the philosophical foundations of Mahāyāna Buddhism and the historical legacy of Nālandā, weaving together textual exegesis, doctrinal interpretation, and institutional history. The speaker began by invoking sacred Buddhist sites such as Guru Lhakhang and Chorten in Gangtok, and the Mahabodhi Temple with the Bodhi Tree at Bodh Gaya, symbolically connecting living traditions with classical centers of learning. The Vajra Seat of Awakening was presented as a powerful emblem of enlightenment, grounding the discussion in both sacred geography and philosophical inquiry.

Keynote Address by Ven. Dr. Pooja Dabral, Assistant Professor, Department of Buddhist Studies, Philosophy and Comparative Religions, Nalanda University



Drawing upon the Heart Sutra, the speaker reflected on the celebrated verse affirming that all Buddhas of the three times attain unsurpassed enlightenment through reliance on Prajñāpāramitā, the Perfection of Wisdom. The well-known declaration—“Form is emptiness; emptiness is form”—was explained not as metaphysical negation but as a profound insight into relational existence. Citing Nagarjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (Chapter 24, Verse 18), the speaker elaborated the inseparability of Śūnyatā (emptiness), Pratītyasamutpāda (dependent origination), and the Middle Path. Emptiness, it was argued, safeguards both the law of karma and compassionate engagement with sentient beings, making wisdom and compassion mutually reinforcing.

The lecture then transitioned to the historical evolution of Nalanda Mahavihara. Contrary to popular imagination, Nālandā developed

gradually from a suburban settlement near Rājagṛha into a major monastic-cum-scholastic institution under Gupta patronage, particularly Kumaragupta I, and later Harshavardhana. Accounts of Xuanzang and Yijing attest to its international character, vast library holdings, and thousands of students and teachers. Spread across approximately 23 hectares, the site preserves viharas, temples, stupas, and layered architectural remains reflecting centuries of intellectual activity.

Emphasis was placed on Nālandā’s inclusive and merit-based admission system and its comprehensive curriculum, which encompassed philosophy, logic, grammar, medicine, and crafts. The speaker concluded by underscoring that Nālandā embodied a synthesis of rigorous scholarship and ethical cultivation—where the pursuit of knowledge was inseparable from compassion and the aspiration toward awakening.





Session I: Buddhism, its History and Contemporary Challenges: From Eastern and Northeastern India Perspectives

After the keynote address, session 1 started. Session I, themed “Buddhism, its History and Contemporary Challenges: From Eastern and Northeastern India Perspectives”, was chaired by Prof. Vinay Kumar Rao. Prof. Projit Kumar Palit (Department of History, Assam University) discussed the historical trajectories of various Buddhist communities in Northeast India, with particular focus on Tripura. He traced their socio-political evolution. Dr. Jhumpa Mukherjee (Associate Professor and Head, Department of Political Science, St.

Xavier’s College, Kolkata) examined the ethical and political values embedded in Buddhist thought, drawing parallels with social contract theories. Dr. Avienaash E. P, Research Assistant, ISCS-ICSSR, argued that Buddhist practices in borderland regions are deeply embedded in regional histories and the lived experiences of marginalized communities. He suggested the need for an alternative analytical framework to move beyond simplistic ‘decline and revival’ narratives of Buddhism.



Felicitations to Prof. Projit Kumar Palit, Professor, Dept. of History, Assam University, Silchar, Assam



Felicitations to Dr. Avienaash E P, Research Assistant, ISCS-ICSSR



Speech by Prof. Projit Kumar Palit, Professor, Dept. of History, Assam University, Silchar, Assam

For the panel discussion, titled, “Buddhism, Its History and Contemporary Challenges: From Eastern and Northeastern Indian Perspective,” the first speaker was Prof. Projit kumar Palit, Professor at the Department of History, Assam University, Silchar. He spoke on the role of Buddhist religion in Northeast India, as well as sources of Buddhist cultural history, from manuscript, art, coin, terracotta inscriptions and archaeological sites in Northeast India. He summarized the contribution of various scholars and archaeologists who have worked on Buddhist structures in Pilak and Mainamoti. Connecting the travel of Buddhist philosophy and culture from Nalanda to NorthEast India, and thereafter, beyond the Arakan range in Myanmar, with specific focus on Tripura. Distinguishing between the Tai-khamti, Chakma, Mong tribes, etc, who reflect the traditions of Theravada Buddhism, while Monpa, Tamang, Lepcha, Bhutia tribes that practice Mahayana Buddhism. He explained that trading centres became the center of cultural exchange during Buddhist expansion, centering

the role of Pilak as a route for travel for Buddhist cultural expansion. He gave examples of Buddhist cornices and monks which have played a role in the interconnectivity between Bengal, Tripura and beyond the Arakan range, as well as Indo-Mongoloid exchanges since the Mauryan period. A discussion on these transborder routes which that have been historically used by regional kingdoms and chieftains who were patrons of Buddhism, and even by Rohingya refugees in contemporary times. Historically, the Buddhist monasteries located on trading routes allowed for syncretic exchange of culture between Brahminic and Buddhist traditions and allowed greater exposure of travelling merchants to Buddhism. He concluded by providing a descriptive explanation of monastery, and Buddhist influenced temples and literature and the interchange of structural traditions from Nalanda to Somapura Mahavihara, including bronze sculptures, drainage system, etc. He also drew attention to the problem of encroachment on archaeological sites.



*Speech by Dr. Jhumpa Mukherjee, HOD, Dept. of Political Science; Associate Professor,
St. Xavier's College, Kolkata*

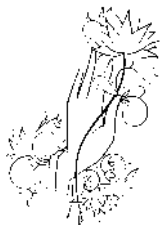
The talk “Political Principles in Buddhism: Ethics, Governance, and the Moral Foundations of Power” offered a nuanced exploration of how Buddhist thought engages questions of authority, legitimacy, and social order. The speaker began by clarifying that Buddhism does not articulate a systematic theory of the state comparable to classical Western political philosophy. However, it provides a deeply influential ethical framework that has shaped political cultures across Asia.

At the heart of the lecture was the argument that Buddhist political thought grounds power in morality rather than coercion. Drawing upon foundational teachings of the Buddha, the speaker emphasized the centrality of śīla (moral conduct), karuṇā (compassion), ahimsā (non-violence), and prajñā (wisdom) as the ethical basis of governance. Political authority, it was argued, is legitimate only when it contributes to the welfare, dignity, and moral development of the people.

The classical ideal of the Dhamma-rāja (righteous ruler) was discussed as a normative model of kingship. In this context, the Ten Duties of the

King (Dasa-rāja-dhamma) were elaborated—generosity, integrity, self-restraint, non-anger, patience, and commitment to justice among them. These principles establish leadership not as domination but as moral stewardship, where rulers are accountable to Dhamma (moral law) rather than personal ambition. The speaker further highlighted Buddhism’s emphasis on interdependence (pratīyasamutpāda) as a political insight. Social conflict, from this perspective, arises from greed, hatred, and ignorance; thus, governance must address structural and psychological roots of suffering. The moral cultivation of both rulers and citizens becomes essential for sustaining harmony.

In concluding, the talk reflected on the adaptability of Buddhist political ethics. While historically associated with monarchies, contemporary interpretations have engaged with democracy, human rights, and social justice. The presentation underscored that in Buddhist thought, inner transformation and just governance are inseparable—ethical self-discipline forming the true foundation of legitimate and compassionate political power.







Speech by Dr. Avienaash E P, Research Assistant, ISCS-ICSSR

Dr. Avienaash E P addressed the question of Buddhism’s “decline” in India from a sociological and historiographical perspective. He began by outlining the dominant narrative that Buddhism had virtually disappeared from India by the 13th–14th centuries. This view attributes decline to multiple factors: the withdrawal of royal patronage after the Gupta and Pala periods, the absorption of Buddhist ideas into Brahmanical Hinduism, the decline of major monastic universities such as Nalanda and Vikramashila, and the Turko-Afghan invasions that accelerated institutional collapse.

Dr. Avienaash argued that colonial historiography reinforced this narrative by relying heavily on inscriptions, archaeological ruins, and textual silences. Consequently, Buddhism came to be represented primarily as an archaeological and textual tradition, rediscovered through excavations at sites such as Sanchi, Bodhi Gaya, and Sarnath, rather than as a lived and practiced religion.

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Challenging this teleological account of disappearance and revival, the speaker pointed to the late nineteenth-century revivalist initiatives led by Anagarika Dharmapala, particularly through the establishment of the Maha Bodhi Society in 1891.

This intervention, he argued, situates the modern Buddhist revival in India nearly a century before the widely cited watershed moment of 1956. Drawing on Douglas Ober’s work, especially *Dust on the Throne*, Dr. Avienaash underscored how the nineteenth-century revival significantly shaped modern Indian intellectual and political history—impacting Hindu reform movements, strands of Indian nationalism, Dalit anti-caste mobilization, leftist thought, and the contours of Nehruvian secular democracy.

From a sociological standpoint, he contended that Buddhism was neither wholly “lost” nor simply in decline; rather, it was rendered peripheral through shifts in political power and historiographical framing. He emphasized the importance of regional histories in understanding how Buddhist practices and ideas remained embedded within local cultures, even when not institutionally dominant. The case of Tamil Buddhism was highlighted to demonstrate how regional traditions complicate homogenizing narratives of disappearance. The speaker also reflected on the modern state’s involvement in shaping Buddhist heritage through policies of conservation, pilgrimage management, and cultural diplomacy, thereby reconstituting Buddhism within new frameworks of governance and identity.





Session II: Buddhism: Its Importance in Socio-Cultural Trends and Towards Sustainable Living

Session II was chaired by Dr. Sarup Prasad Ghosh, Director, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIAS), Kolkata. Shri Raj Basu, Advisor (Rural Tourism & Homestay), Government of Arunachal Pradesh, spoke about state initiatives promoting sustainable tourism rooted in local Buddhist cultural practices. Prof. Ujjwal Kumar (Department of Buddhist Studies,

University of Calcutta) reflected on the Bodhi Tree as a symbolic and institutional centre of Buddhist thought, emphasizing sustainability as a core value. Dr. Ajanta Das, Research Associate, ISCS-ICSSR, presented on Buddhist festivals and demonstrated how ritual practices embody principles of ecological balance and community participation.





Felicitation to Chair Dr. Sarup Prasad Ghosh, Director, The Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIAS), Kolkata



Felicitation to Sh. Raj Basu, Adviser, Rural Tourism & Homestays at Government of Arunachal Pradesh



Felicitation to Prof. Ujjwal Kumar, Department of Buddhist Studies, University of Calcutta, Kolkata



Felicitation to Dr. Ajanta Das, Research Associate, ISCS-ICSSR



Speech by Sh. Raj Basu, Adviser, Rural Tourism & Homestays at Government of Arunachal Pradesh

For the panel discussion, titled, "Buddhism: Its Importance in Socio-cultural Trends and towards Sustainable Living," the first speaker was Shri. Raj Basu, Adviser Rural Tourism & Homestays at Government of Arunachal Pradesh, and is the founder of the Association for Conservation & Tourism (ACT). Working with communities in the Northeast India, and widely known as "Tourism Gandhi," he linked to the previous panel's central theme of 'Buddha lost and found.' He explained the role of Buddhism in tourism can be seen in: the pilgrimage to the footsteps of Buddha; ruins of Buddha sasana (universities, monasteries, etc); living Buddhist practices, in which the University of Calcutta was the originator for modern revivalism; and engaged Buddhism (promotion of peaceful, meditative, philosophical practices of Buddhism). Representing Association for Conservation & Tourism (ACT), Shri. Basu summarized the work of ACT in promoting living Buddhism in Northeast India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar, marking the evolution of changing Buddhist practices, with organization of Purvauttara Mahautsabha across Buddhist

Communities. taking the example of Monigong village, dominated by Adi Bokar tribe, which follow the cultural practices of 'bio-divinity,' a recent acceptance as against naturism/animism by UNESCO, with worship corners in mulghars (worship alters), with material exchange with Tibetan Buddhists. The importance of trade routes that resulted in cultural, architectural, material exchanges have resulted to Buddhism living as a practice rather than a religion. Shri. Basu talked of the sustainable practices of the communities of Arunachal Pradesh, including the inheritance of looms by girls, etc. the centrality of biodiversity as the currency of Northeast India, illustrating with examples like that of hornbill chieftain headgears, mithuns and bride price, etc. Marking the inclusion of biodiversity as a central Buddhist practice, he spoke of the diverse communities across the Himalayas, Chakma, Khamba, Khamti, Memba, Monpa, Tikhak, etc. His discussion contributed to the best practices for local communities towards cultural tourism with his insights helping to envision the central Buddhist thesis on sustainability and heritage.



Speech by Prof. Ujjwal Kumar, Department of Buddhist Studies, University of Calcutta, Kolkata

Dr. Kumar spoke on the theme “The Bodhi Trees of the Buddhas.” In his talk, Dr. Kumar examined the Theravada tradition’s canonical enumeration of twenty-eight Buddhas, each of whom is believed to have attained Enlightenment beneath a distinct Bodhi Tree, though all at the sacred site of Bodh Gaya. Drawing extensively from Pali sources such as the Anguttara Nikaya, Majjhima Nikaya, Buddhavamsa, and the Visuddhimagga, he demonstrated how early Buddhist literature valorized the tree root as an ideal site for meditation—described as modest, blameless, quiet, and conducive to solitude. Dr. Kumar emphasized that Buddhism did not merely adopt trees as passive backdrops for spiritual attainment;

rather, it transformed them into enduring sacred symbols. The Bodhi Tree became a powerful nexus linking the terrestrial and the transcendental, the ecological and the soteriological. The commentarial tradition, as he noted, enumerates ten virtues of tree roots that render them ideal for contemplative practice. Furthermore, the changing of leaves, as discussed in the Visuddhimagga, serves as a meditation on impermanence, thereby integrating natural observation into doctrinal insight. Through this analysis, the speaker highlighted how Buddhism sacralized elements of the natural environment, embedding spiritual meaning within ecological forms and contributing to a distinctive religious environmental imagination.



Speech by Dr. Ajanta Das, Research Associate, ISCS-ICSSR

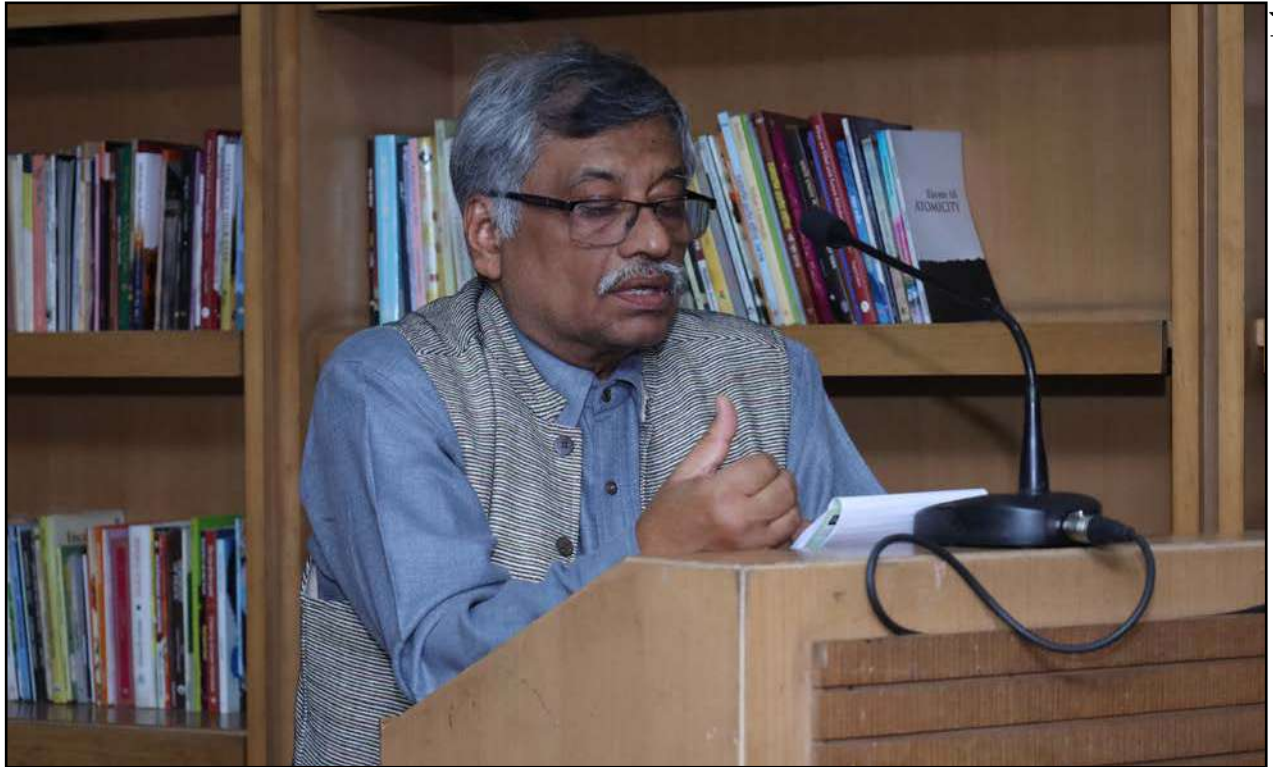
At the outset of the talk, Dr. Ajanta Das outlined the overall trajectory of her two-year research project. Dr. Ajanta Das carefully explained the research design and data structure, which combined nearly 3000 structured interviews with qualitative interactions involving monks, scholars, community elders, and local experts. By integrating quantitative survey data with ethnographic insights, she demonstrated how the project systematically mapped lived practices and traced the broader socio-cultural significance of Buddhism in the region.

She then detailed the geographical spread of the fieldwork. In Arunachal Pradesh, the study covered the Monpa (Tawang and West Kameng), Shertukpen (West Kameng), Memba (Shi Yomi and Upper Siang), Tai-Khamti (Changlang, Lohit, and Namsai), Singpho (Changlang), and Tikhak-Tangsa (Changlang) communities. In Sikkim, research was conducted among the Bhutia (Mangan, Gyashing, Gangtok), Lepcha (Mangan and Dzongu), Tamang (Namchi and Gangtok), Sherpa (Soreng and Namchi), and Gurung (Pakyong) communities. In North Bengal, the focus was on Bhutia settlements in Bhutia Basti, Ghoom, Jorebunglow, and Sonada; Lepcha communities in Darjeeling Town and Chitlong (Kurseong); Dukpa communities in Ghoom, Jorebunglow, and Lamahatta; Tamang settlements in Rangbull, Dhoteria, and Darjeeling Town; and Sherpa populations across Darjeeling Town, Ghoom, Jorebunglow, Sonada, Rangbull, and Kurseong.

Building on nearly nine years of her personal field engagement, the speaker highlighted how Buddhism permeates everyday life, ritual practices, art, and ecological ethics. The first case study focused on the Tai-Khamti community of Namsai district, followers of Theravada Buddhism. Their principal performing art, Ka Poong (dance-story), blends music, dance, and storytelling. Many performances draw on the Jataka tales of the Buddha's previous births. The Golden Deer dance (Ka-Toe), for instance, reflects narratives such as the Nigrodharaja Jataka and episodes associated with the Tushita heaven, embedding Buddhist cosmology and moral teachings within aesthetic expression. Even romantic folk songs incorporate ideas of karma and rebirth, demonstrating Buddhism's deep cultural integration. The second and third case studies linked Buddhist practices to sustainability. The Theravada observance of Varsa Vassa (rainy season retreat) and the Mahayana festival of Saka Dawa emphasize non-violence, restraint, and protection of crops and living beings. Practices such as abstaining from travel, hunting, and killing during these sacred periods reduce ecological harm and reinforce environmental ethics. The talk concluded that across diverse geographies and sects, Buddhism continues to shape socio-cultural life while fostering sustainable living traditions in Northeast India.



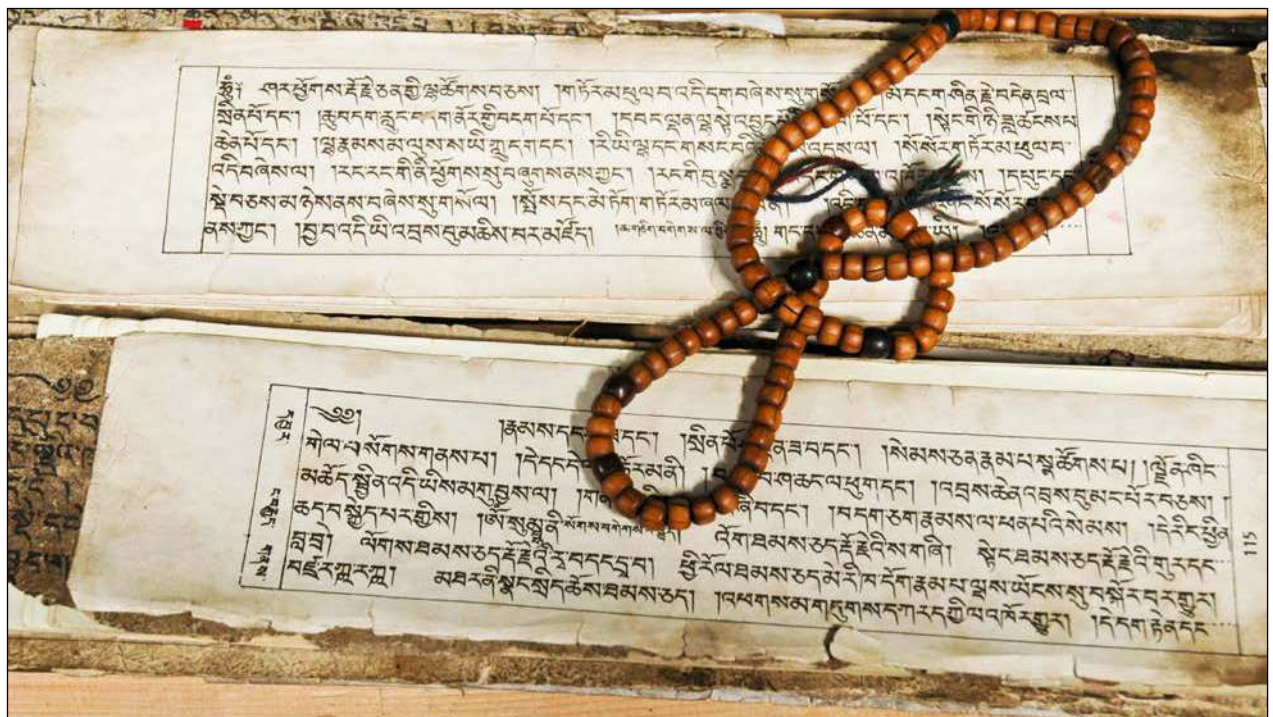




Valedictory Address by Prof. Alok Kumar Ghosh, Former Head, Department of History, University of Kalyani, Kolkata

The seminar concluded with a Valedictory Address by Prof. Alok Kumar Ghosh, Former Head, Department of History, University of Kalyani, Kolkata. He offered a comprehensive overview of the deliberations and

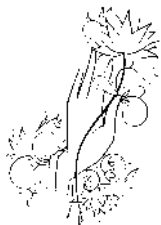
appreciated the interdisciplinary approach adopted by the seminar. He underscored the importance of sustained research on Buddhist communities in India's Himalayan and borderland regions







Report on One Day National Seminar on Socio-Cultural Practices among the Buddhist Communities of Himalayan Region and Nearby Areas



Lunch time

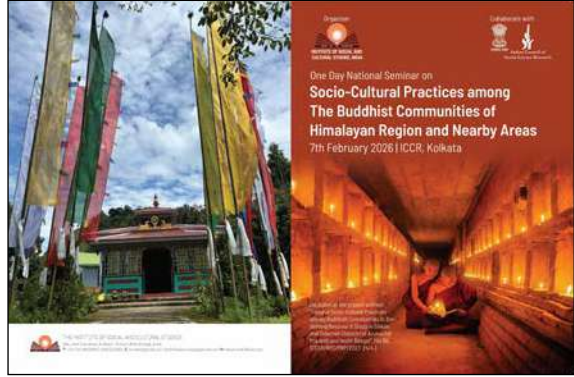




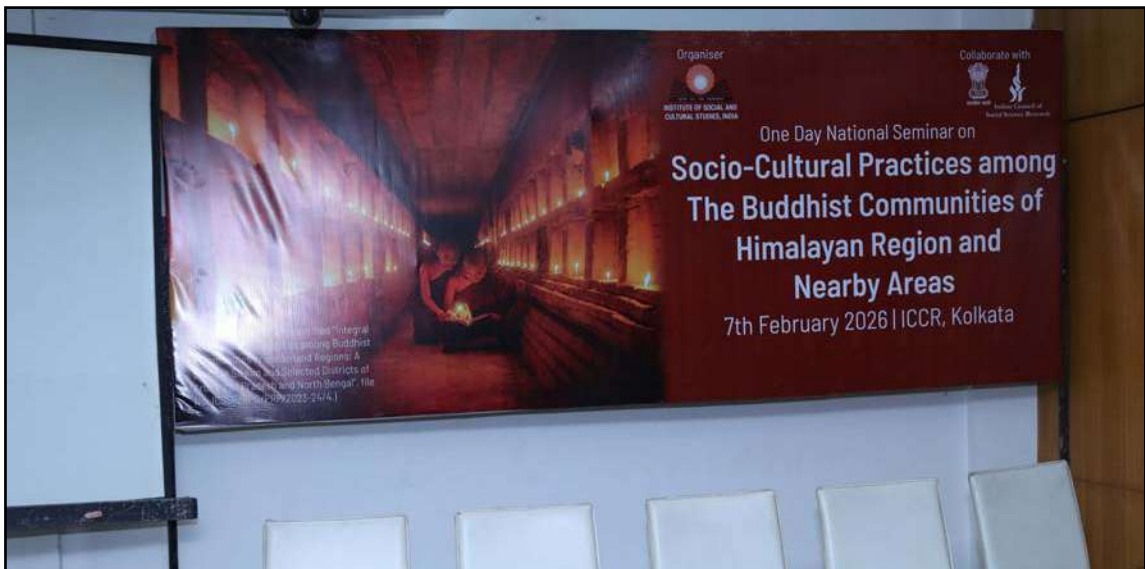
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Programme Flyer



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04

Kolkata, Monday
9 February, 2026

Miscellaneous

Kolkata hosts National Seminar on Buddhism

MI News Service, Kolkata: Kolkata recently hosted a National Seminar on “Socio-Cultural Practices among The Buddhist Communities of Himalayan Region and Nearby Areas”. The programme was held at ICCR and was organized by Institute of Social and Cultural Studies (ISCS), India.

Eminent personalities and social scientists like Arindam Mukherjee(Director-ISCS), Prof Vinay Kr Rao(JNU), Dr. Puja Dabral(Nalanda University), Prof Projit Kr Palit(Assam University), Dr. Jhumpa Mukherjee(HOD-Pol Sc-St Xaviers College), Dr. Avienaash EP, Dr. Swarup Prasad Ghosh(Director-MAKAIAS), Raj Basu(Advisor-Rural Tourism & Home stays-Govt of Arunachal Pradesh), Prof Ujjal Kumar(Dept of Buddhist Studies-Kolkata University), Dr. Ajanta Das(Research Associate-ISCS-ICSSR), Prof Alok Kumar Ghosh and many other dignitaries were present at the auspicious occasion.

The seminar laid emphasis on varied topics encompassing ‘Buddhism’, its history and contemporary challenges. It also discussed matters related to ‘Buddhism’ and its importance in socio-cultural trends towards sustainable living.



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