

Einladung zu einem Forschungsvortrag von
Prof. **Sumathi Srinivasalu** (University of Madras, Chennai, Indien)
am **18.11.2025 (Dienstag), 16:15 Uhr, Room: 04.111 GFG***

**The Media Economy and its Unequal Impact on Vulnerable Communities
An Anthropological Case Study of India**



Abstract: This talk examines how India's contemporary media economy dominated by digital platforms yet interwoven with legacy broadcast systems reshapes vulnerability among marginalized communities. Drawing on Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* (1934), the analysis situates media practices within broader cultural configurations rather than as isolated technological effects. Benedict's insight that cultures exhibit "patterns" of value and behavior helps to frame Indian media usage as embedded in kinship, morals, norms, obligation, and identity, where forwarding a WhatsApp message or circulating a short video is not merely informational but a performance of care, vigilance, or belonging. Thus, rumor and misinformation operate not simply as errors but as socially meaningful acts within patterned systems of trust and reciprocity.

The talk mobilizes core anthropological concepts culture as learned behavior, social structure, symbols and meaning, and the relationship between individual agency and collective norms to interpret how media economies amplify harm. Digital virality, algorithmic amplification, and vernacular fragmentation intersect with enduring cultural fields such as caste, gender, and kinship, producing unique pathways of risk. Ethnographic sensitivity reveals that corrections often fail not due to lack of information but because they threaten face and social ties. Case studies of rumor-driven lynchings, the COVID-19 migrant crisis, the Karur crowd surge, and the Kuki-Meitei conflict demonstrate how media infrastructures intersect with cultural logics to accelerate violence, stigmatization, and displacement.

The talk argues for anthropology-informed interventions: embedding rumor responses in kinship networks, designing face-saving correctives, and creating virality-aware public protocols. Such approaches recognize that media is not external to society but an extension of cultural patterns. Following Benedict, the challenge is not to treat harmful content as aberrant but to understand how it coheres within cultural logics—and to design safeguards that respect these logics while mitigating harm.

Bio: Prof. S. Sumathi is an accomplished academican in the field of Socio-Cultural Anthropology, University of Madras, Chennai. She is the recipient of many coveted International, National Fellowships such as "Full Bright Nehru Fellowship" USA, and served as Professor at Appalachian State University, North Carolina, USA., the prestigious DAAD fellow at the University of Passau, Germany, and UK Charles Wallace Fellow at the Queen's University, Belfast, Ireland. She was also a Guest Researcher Fellow at the University of Tours, France. She is also a Guest researcher and scientific advisor for International Research at Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, Germany. She was honored with the prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award by United India Anthropological Forum at World Anthropology Congress 2024 for her applied research on Indian community studies and her accomplished research outputs credited her as a practicing anthropologist. She has been nominated by the Government of Tamil Nadu as an 'Expert Anthropologist' for the "Appellant Vigilance Committee" to contribute anthropological knowledge and perspective to various ongoing issues concerned with the issuance and verification of community certificates. Her empirical research outputs were relied upon in various judicial pronouncement of the Honourable Madras High Court. The Government of Tamil Nadu also relied and utilized her context specific Ethnographies of various communities to resolve the community identity. She was an Indian partner in the international research titled 'AI FORA'. She is now an Adjunct Professor, University of Madras. She has been nominated as an Anthropology Expert, for the National Jal Jeevan Mission, India Project (2025), by Anthropological Survey of India. She has undertaken State project on Stakeholder engagement strategy, communication, and handholding/training support for "Tamil Nadu climate resilient urban development program (p179189), funded by World Bank.

Der Gastwissenschaftlerinnen-Aufenthalt von Sumathi Srinivasalu wird vom IPP Mainz finanziell unterstützt.

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* The lecture will take place in Room 04.111 on the 4th floor of the Georg-Förster-Building on Johannes-Gutenberg-University campus. After exiting the elevators, you will find signs pointing you towards the left hallway, the room will be directly on your left.

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