

The Performativity of Knowledge: Rethinking Academic Conferences Through Embodied Practice

Sudeshna Biswas , Avitoli G. Zhimo and Sonuja Nandinee Barik

Abstract

This article critically re-examines the cultural programme series of the 19th IUAES-WAU World Anthropology Congress, Kala Utsava, alongside other artistic expressions, treating them not just as leisure and divertissement but as epistemic interventions that reshape traditional academic conferences. Kala Utsava centred performativity, challenging the separation of art and scholarship. The transnational performances, multimodal exchanges, and embodied knowledge created a lively ethnographic space, encouraging collaborative meaning-making that extended beyond written texts. Artists, scholars, and diverse audiences collaborated to depict culture as vibrant, reflective, and emotionally resonant. The essay regards Kala Utsava as a methodological and educational approach that bridges hierarchical divides between the speaker and the audience, theory and practice, as well as local and global perspectives. It encourages a framework that combines creative expression with critical thinking, transforming conferences into spaces for experiential and transformative knowledge rather than merely disciplinary venues.

Keywords: Kala Utsava, anthropology, embodied knowledge, performativity

Introduction

Academic conference discussions often visualise cultural programmes as minor, leisure-focused activities separate from leading scholarly exchanges. This perspective echoes past attitudes, where public engagement in academia was considered ‘frivolous, faddish, and tokenistic’ until the rise of the ‘impact’ agenda, which emphasised its importance to demonstrate research value (Watermeyer 2012: 115). At the same time, the growing prominence of curated cultural programmes at international academic conferences, especially in anthropology, prompts us to reconsider how knowledge is generated, interpreted, and disseminated. (Clifford 1997; Pratt 1991). Building on this, the article discusses how the 19th IUAES-WAU World Anthropology Congress

SUDESHNA BISWAS, Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi. Email: sbiswas@anthro.du.ac.in

AVITOLI G. ZHIMO, Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi. Email: agzhimo@anthro.du.ac.in

SONUJA NANDINEE BARIK, Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi. Email: bariksonuja24@gmail.com