



A90 Forensic Anthropology As a Neglected Field of Inquiry in Forensic Death Investigations in India: A Critical Evaluation of the Current Scenario and Future Possibilities

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Learning Overview: The goal of this presentation is: (1) to inform attendees about the current status and future prospects of utilization of anthropological knowledge in forensic death investigations in India; and (2) to seek suggestions from international participants on how to enforce forensic anthropological examination of unknown skeletal remains as an integral part of such analyses.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating that forensic anthropological analyses should be considered as a significant component in forensic death investigations of unknown human remains.

Forensic anthropological evidence can be used more effectively and robustly to help the criminal legal system in a country such as India where subtle variations in human physical and skeletal features of diverse heterogeneous population groups can be useful for identification of unknown individuals/skeletal remains. Investigating agencies generally seek the assistance of forensic pathologists for identity establishment of bundles/heaps of unknown human skeletal remains retrieved from desolate forests, natural ravines, roadside trenches, disused wells, potholes, sewage systems, pits, waterways, etc. The inherent medical expertise of a pathologist trained in India is not considered sufficient to opine an objective identity of such remains. In India, a forensic anthropologist is rarely warranted for the identification of such remains, as there are hardly any Indian medical institutions where forensic anthropologists are employed as experts in the constituted multidisciplinary investigating teams.

Forensic anthropologists are supposed to have in-depth specialized knowledge of human bodily features and skeletal variations present among individuals of different population groups. There are several criminal cases reported in India in which forensic anthropologists have played a crucial role in identification strategies of the victims or suspects, such as: the Sheena Bora murder (Mumbai, 2012), the Nirbhaya gang-rape (Delhi, 2014), the 26/11 Mumbai terror convict (Mumbai, 2008), the Nithari serial rapes and killings (Ghaziabad, 2006), and the Naina Sahni Tandoor murder (Delhi, 1995) case. Very recently, thousands of human skeletal and dental remains, in addition to many contextual items of personal identity, have been recovered from an abandoned well found situated beneath a religious structure in a north Indian state.

The deep sense of professional superiority has seriously affected better dispensation of justice in India as anthropological analysis has not been considered an essential component of medicolegal death investigation by forensic pathologists. The medicolegal fraternity doubt and ignore the significance of vital anthropological input in forensic death investigations, particularly in mass disaster cases where multiple casualties occur. India is home to mass disasters (both natural and man-made) wherein thousands of people die nearly every year. The identity establishment of such victims becomes essential for the completion of some documentation, such as insurance claims, job benefits, property claims, bank transfers, etc.; however, they remain unsolved puzzles for years, despite the best efforts of forensic pathologists (without any expertise inputs from anthropologists). The unknown human skeletal remains brought by police officials are viewed as physical objects and such autopsies are conducted by non-forensic clinicians for the sake of completion of some legal formalities. Thus, vital clues of identity about the victims are lost at the postmortem table in the absence of an expert opinion of a forensic anthropologist in India.

Forensic anthropologists can look over the shoulders of a forensic pathologist at the autopsy table for the most reliable and scientific identification acceptable in legal contexts, so the experts of two disciplines should adopt a collaborative approach. This presentation will highlight the current scenario of the utilization of anthropological knowledge in forensic death investigations in an Indian context and its future possibilities in reference to recent forensic cases solved utilizing anthropological input and evidence. Conclusions have been derived because of experiences working as an anthropologist for several years in a forensic medical department of a medical institution and by interviews of forensic pathologists of various autopsy departments across the country.

Forensic Anthropology, Current Status, India