

'Harnessing Power of New Media For Preserving Folk Culture: Approaches In The Santhali Context'

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Introduction

In the book 'Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man,' author Marshall McLuhan states that the pathway of the evolution of communication techniques is marked by the emergence of four periods. The first is oral, where folklore and culture were passed on from generation to generation via narration. With grammar not being well evolved, writing was largely absent. Stories, narrations, descriptions, songs, and poems were some verbal ways through which learning was passed on. The next phase brought about the written form, with the advent of grammar and details of sentence construction. This was when authorship came to the fore with different types of literature covering many subjects. McLuhan marked the third phase as that of printing when texts started getting published in different languages and conveying different content. This resulted in the documentation of culture prevalent then and subsequent developments.

As described by McLuhan, the fourth phase was one where visuals and narratives combined and were referred to as secondary orality. Essentially this was indicative of the domain of mass media and expressly indicated the advent and popularization of the television media (McLuhan 1964). In their specific ways, each of these phases contributed differently to the transmission, sourcing, and preservation of traditional and folk cultures, bringing forth varied channels through which folklore and culture found newer modes of communication and documentation. To this list, Hungarian author Zoltan Szuts adds the phenomena of the world wide web, the fast development of which undoubtedly has had a transformational impact on communication and interaction. In the book 'Metaphors of the

World Wide Web: An Introduction to the Art of New Media,' Szuts explains that the advent internet and virtual communication has ushered in the age of touch and augmented reality (Szuts 2013). According to the author, this phase holds within itself the specialities of the earlier phases and, in composite, offers a communication medium that comprises sound, visuals, and touch. Such trajectory from narration to augmented reality, in a way, underlines the evolution constantly occurring in regards to the generation and flow of information, its subsequent recording and documentation. With changes in the communications landscape, what is also changing is the way information is being recorded, preserved and transmitted. In keeping with the evolution of communication approaches and technologies, storage techniques and subsequent retrieval of traditional elements related to folk culture are also transforming. Therefore, the central question is how in this fifth period of evolving communication technology, new age media can be optimally leveraged so that folk culture and tradition be effectively preserved for reference by future generations eager to know about their roots.

Interpretation of folk culture and traditions

Before focusing on probable approaches to preserving folk culture and tradition, it is pertinent to explore what is meant by folk culture. In his edited book 'The Study of Folklore,' Alan Dundes, in the chapter 'What is Folklore?' explains folk as being associated with groups of individuals who among themselves have at least one factor in common. So people speaking a similar language constitute a folk group, while people practising similar religions will constitute another folk group. Along similar lines, there can be and have been different folk groups based on food habits, traditional practices, dressing approaches and such factors (Dundes 1956). Over the years, ethnographic researchers have included such groups in their work, attempting to understand different aspects of life and living of such folk

groups and tracing their origin and evolution. Knowledge and narrative within these folk groups came to be folklore, and standard practices, interpreted as tradition, have also emerged as central research areas undertaken by ethnographers (Dundes 1956). Hungarian ethnographic researcher Vilmos Keszeg, in the article 'Five decades of Hungarian folklore research in Romania, mention the different criteria basis which folk culture and tradition are identified. Put another way, Keszeg presented the basis against which traditions or cultures are evaluated and interpreted as folk culture or folklore. The first element for a culture to be considered traditional or folk is to have a long history, not something of recent origin. Be it music, art, dance form, narratives or anything else, it must have been in circulation for generations and therefore is ancestral. This labels folk as any practice passed on from one generation to another over an extended period (Keszeg 1995). The second criteria require folk forms to have an inherent rural characteristic that sharply contrasts with forms with more urban relevance or emergence. This places several habits, lifestyles, art forms, songs, literature and dressing within the domain of folk culture or tradition since they can be traced back to having a connection with the everyday life of peasants or rural populace. This aspect gains further clarity when considering art forms like Madhubani or Warli in the Indian context.

Both have long histories, with women traditionally engaging in these forms. The former art style, linked to the Mithila region in Bihar state, was depicted by women on the mud walls of their houses. Madhubani paintings are done on paper, cloth and other mediums and are of more recent origin. Women peculiarly used fingers, dry twigs, and natural colour extract to bring the characters to life. The use of brushes and other paints came to be applied much later (Heinz 2006). Warli, which owes its roots to the tribal populace of the Maharashtra region, has been traced back to the 10th century. It is generally considered the oldest form in the history of art in India (Vilhat 2019).

The rejection of urbanization and contemporary lifestyle by the Warli tribe is evident in each art piece, which depicts in detail the community's everyday life. The different art pieces communicate their occupation, music, instruments, household chores, and community feeling (Vilhat 2019). Similarly, in Madhubani paintings, mythological beliefs of the Mithila populace, together with different community practices and elements of nature like the sun, make repetitive appearances. Fish, birds and flowers portray the environment within which the community has been residing for generations. This touch of rural lifestyle and elements labels a depiction as folk and is something Keszeg indicated. Aesthetics is the third element that runs through all forms of folk culture, art forms and folklore, and they are festive and vibrant. This sets folk forms from others that lack such aesthetic value and are more mundane in nature and treatment. A unique combination of aesthetics, vibrancy, and festivity is potent in Madhubani paintings, with bright colours and intricate detailing attracting viewer attention. Compositions reverberate nature's colour and beauty, which the rural populace is surrounded by and appreciate. Keszeg (1995) also mentions oral narration as a distinguishing factor for folklore and culture. This underlines that such tales and accounts have been circulated from the time prior to the formalization of grammar and written letters.

Internet proliferation and preservation potential

Vajda Andras, in the paper 'Folk Culture on the Internet: Use, Context and Function', clarifies that the evolution of the internet is currently making it possible for local cultures and traditions to reach far and wide and thus appeal to new groups who may not have known about its existence previously. In addition to this unique advantage provided by internet connectivity, Andras also argues that such proliferation transforms folk culture and traditions into content that is uniform and open to interpretations by other local groups. Virtual representation of traditions, which were previously transmitted orally or incorporated in the

form of scriptures and books, has become a possibility with the advent of the world wide web. Arguing this point further, Michael Falser and Monica Juneja, in their account 'Archaeologizing Heritage and Transcultural Entanglements: An Introduction', observes that the internet is increasingly playing an active role in preserving traditional culture and heritage and its subsequent consumption by younger and new generations. The internet is becoming increasingly instrumental in bridging the gap between the present and the past and merging traditional values, cultures, rituals and artistic forms with current lifestyles (Falser and Juneja, 2013). Andras (2015) further mentions online blogs and discussion forums, making it possible for practically anyone with knowledge of tradition and folk culture to orate their perspectives to a broader audience, even internationally. Such interventions make it possible for anyone and everyone to learn about their traditional forms and those of others, which widens the periphery of engagement and discussion about folk culture and traditional norms. The People's Rural Archive of India (PARI) is a case in point, which is an online archive of traditions, cultures, issues, struggles, and achievements of rural masses. Each report, published on the website, is archival material that can be used without time and place restrictions.

To assess how the terms folklore and folk culture are being interpreted and popularized in the virtual space, Andras (2015) surveyed Google and Bing using critical words like tradition, folk culture, folk music, traditional customs, poetry, folklore and such. From the results generated, the author concluded that across both platforms, tradition and folklore were higher on the popularity ranking than compared to others. This research also hinted at folk culture being more linked to folk music in the internet domain. However, the most popular and comprehensive category was found to be folklore when the same exercise was conducted on the video streaming platform YouTube. It generated over 4,30,000

results. This was followed by a folk dance with over 70,000 and folk music having over 43,000 content generations (Andras 2015).

Notwithstanding the underlying connotations, from the preservation perspective, these are encouraging results. It indicates preserving traditional and folk forms, which others can learn from in their studies and searches. Today, virtual space is taking local forms to a global audience, thus enhancing awareness about the various folk forms, their relevance, and the learning it offers for present-day life. Interestingly the study reported about a generation of new-age folk lovers having emerged. Their principal source of information is the internet and the social media platforms it enables. It is not from their grandparents, parents or books, and such literary sources that this generation is learning about folklore and culture. Their initiation into the different forms and formats is happening via social media, facilitating their acquisition of insights into the diverse folk forms.

Social media and preservation of folk culture

In concluding his work, Andras (2015) notes that technology-based communication about folk culture and tradition derives information from four distinct sources. These are researches and studies about folk, from public forums and inputs, contributions of entrepreneurs dealing with folk elements and users of the different platforms. While the first refers to scholarly works about folk tradition, the second refers to information from people and institutions associated with folk culture, with homepages of the latter leveraged for presenting reports and discussions on specific topics. Governments, associations, organizations, clubs, and tourism-linked sites are sources of information about traditional culture. Blogs, news sites, online encyclopaedias, platforms for sharing files and documents and e-commerce sites offering folk-related products are also sources of information for those willing to explore traditional forms and practices.

In the article 'How Social Media Can Be An Asset for the Preservation of Intangible Heritage,' author Mattie Sparks argues in support of social media's positive contributions to preserving folk culture and forms through sharing. In explaining this point, Sparks refers to the list of intangible heritage practices by UNESCO in 2003. The institution clarified the term referring to any tradition of existing expressions inherited and passed on to succeeding generations. Annually this list is revised with new inclusions given effect. Dance forms, traditional or folk-related skills, and other cultural forms are considered for a place on the list. This is a vital initiative, as many folk forms and traditions slowly move towards extinction as community sizes continue dwindling. Sparks points out that for such traditions in peril, social media platforms present opportunities for recording and documenting their styles, leading to preservation for referencing when required.

In this regard and about YouTube specifically, Pietrobruno (2013) notes that the platform is similar to an archive enabling participation and interaction. The comments section at the end of each video offers space to exchange ideas and information. This, according to Pietrobruno, adds to the primary body of knowledge and collections, thereby widening its volume. When intangible heritage practices are mentioned on YouTube, it reaches a larger audience and attains a kind of immortalization due to the documentation in the process. Besides this, other social media platforms also share information about heritage and traditions and their practitioners. The latter group is allowed to publicize their works, document and record their performance to realize it in the public domain via social media platforms. This can facilitate more comprehensive learning about the practices among those who probably were unaware of things and compare how such practices differ from theirs. Sparks (2020) claim that such knowledge dissemination can often bring funding for organizations working in the domains of folk culture and tradition and enhance knowledge sharing. Researchers have also noted that search engines significantly enable users to

search for information about cultures, traditions, and events related to the searched topic. Users thus have access to the literary and practising aspects, improving insight and understanding.

In the article, Sparks also draws attention to how online and social media platforms are helping in the documentation of languages, which, according to UNESCO, is not an intangible heritage. Online educational portals or coaching services offer programs in traditional languages so that others too come to know about them and have the scope of learning if interested. A case in point is the language teaching website Duolingo introducing modules for Hawaiian and Navajo languages for their English-speaking candidates. This is a significant step in preserving dying languages as it opens up the possibility of imparting knowledge about the language to members of the present generation. This is a step additional to documentation and can contribute to augmenting the lifespan of languages. Through such websites offering programs in traditional and forgotten languages, they will become increasingly accessible to those who would have otherwise remained oblivious.

In her blog 'Media-Catalyst for Preserving and Promoting Local Culture', Shilpi Jain argues in favour of the critical contributions of new age media in ensuring the wide dissemination of local folk cultures and traditions across the globe. According to her, media in general and social media, in particular, act as glue binding together folk culture and traditions of the East and West. Media ensures a seamless flow of information from one nation to another, making it possible for someone residing in the west to know about the dance sequences of gipsy of Rajasthan. Alternatively, someone residing in the East is also learning about traditional Western dance forms or their influence. Western dramas have had on the development of Indian literature (Jain 2016). Building on these premises, the author presents a strong case for Media Information Literacy and states that this aspect can be

immensely helpful in promoting and preserving folk culture, folklores and other forms of traditional art and cultural forms. Elaborating on how media can aid in engaging and preserving folk culture, Jain (2016) lays down four specific advantages. The first is media becoming a channel through which best practices in preserving local traditional culture reach a wider audience and thus create the possibility of others replicating such practices in their way and within their domain. Jain (2016) presents the example of Purulia in West Bengal, which has a long history of traditional dance forms, music and art. At the grass-root level, artisans involved in the practice of these forms have taken it onto themselves to play their bit in protecting their traditional art from oblivion. They have formed self-help groups and adapted their art as a sustainable livelihood. For funding requirements, they turn to banks and financial institutions and avail microfinance-related monetary support to carry forward their livelihood initiatives. Such an effort finds circulation far and wide when reported by the media and social media. It can encourage other folk culture groups to come forward and do their bit to protect their traditional cultures. To this extent, media can provide encouragement, motivation, and ideas to different people about preserving traditional cultures and how the same can become a livelihood option (Jain 2016).

The author touches on the second aspect is media facilitating a confluence of different cultures and traditions. Social media platforms have the potential to evolve into channels of intercultural exchanges and dialogues, which can bring about a better blending of traditions from across the globe. Such approaches can usher in community feeling among folk artists and cultural activists, irrespective of their location. Thus, concerted efforts to preserve traditions and folk culture can be possible. Social media has made it possible to form virtual groups and communities, where the exchange of ideas, thoughts and efforts can occur among artisans otherwise spread far and wide. With its obliteration of boundaries, the internet enables the construction of global communities and strengthens efforts toward

cascading and showcasing folk culture and traditions (Jain 2016). Identification and promotion of cultural brand ambassadors also seem plausible in this age of social media. The internet can become a resourceful channel utilizing which individuals with immense contributions towards folk culture and tradition can be identified. Subsequently, such individuals can be showcased as ambassadors providing encouragement and direction to others to tread the path which will be in the best interest of traditional culture and languages (Jain 2016). The widespread ownership of smartphones and internet penetration is also a boon. It has made sharing videos and visuals easier related to folklore, culture, and traditions. Hence it is not unthinkable today for a person in Argentina to know about Kalaripayattu, a traditional martial art form of Kerala with over 3000 years. Because videos shot using even essential smartphones are being viewed by millions globally, the quantum of impact information and visuals of traditional forms can have on global viewers is immensely significant (Jain 2016).

Several groups, institutions, organizations, and individuals are leveraging the internet, and social media platforms to enhance awareness and knowledge about the varied traditional forms and significantly contribute to their sustenance and global consumption. Discussions, exchanges, awareness creation and continued practice of traditional cultures, forms and languages will help keep them in circulation and prevent them from becoming extinct. On the other hand, it can trigger renewed focus on such cultures and heritages and thus get a more comprehensive section of the global population to take an active interest, restricting folk forms from passing into the ages. As technological progress continues unabated, it can be expected that in the future, several other platforms and avenues will become available utilizing which nuances of varied folk cultures can be preserved for referencing, knowledge and learning of future generations.

Social Media for Preservation in Practise: Santhal Folk Culture

Priyanka Soren and Waluneba Jamir, in their article 'The Santhals: Their Culture and Traditions', mention that Santhals among being the most important tribal groups in the country, with presence across the states of West Bengal, Orissa, Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya. Beyond national boundaries, their presence can be noted in Nepal, Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh. Santhals are known to have a rich history of folk traditions like music, handicrafts, dance form, language and artistic endeavours. With agriculture being their principal source of economic engagement, they consider land pious and precious and are always ready to save it at all costs. Collecting forest produces, hunting and fishing are the other occupational initiatives Santhali tribals involve themselves in (Soren and Jamir 2021). Being one of the oldest tribal groups in India, they continue living a simple life residing in primarily forested areas. Due to a lack of educational exposure, particularly among the older generations, they hold onto superstitious beliefs and practices, which are also considered part of their traditional firmament. According to Soren and Jamir (2021), Santhali is a skilled artisan who displays creative skills in making their musical instruments, clay ovens, materials required for fishing, baskets, brooms, and mats and cots. While seniors continue to live in their known environment, many youngsters show a propensity for better life and living and migrate to cities and towns to find employment in factories and industries. With their distinct and separate language, ritualized forms of dancing, traditional festivals and ceremonies, the Santhals have successfully maintained their unique place within the Indian society despite invasions, the onslaught of new technologies and government alterations. Soren and Jamir (2021) note the strong cultural background of the Santhals, with music and dance forming an integral part of their social festival, marriages and memorable occasion. Though their musical tunes seem similar to one another, they represent various musical approaches ranging from *Dasai*, *Don*, *Baha*, *Sohrae* and *Data* to *Gilwari*. After a

hard day's work, community members gather for music and dance for relaxation and rejuvenation. Their dance formation is typically linear, and members sing along while performing the dance sequences. Each song is suited for a specific occasion and hides within itself a narrative, which leads one to conclude that Santhali songs convey their folklore also (Soren and Jamir, 2021). The women folk participate in the dancing formations, while males accompany them as instrumentalists. Traditional musical instruments include the Tiria or flute made from bamboo, having seven holes which the player controls to produce specific notes; the Tamak, which is a wooden instrument with leather at one end and hollow on the other; the Dhatra, which is a stringed instrument and the violin replicating Kat Banam. Harmonium and cymbals are also used during musical and dance performances. The Santhals also have their distinct folk-art forms, which narrate their simple life and the activities they engage in daily. In such paintings, their instruments and household items also find inclusion; hence, they stand out as holistic encapsulation of Santhal living and the environment they thrive within. The instruments they use for cultivation and hunting are also depicted in their art forms, from which viewers can comprehend their traditions and practices (Soren and Jamir, 2021).

Given the depth and richness of their folk tradition and culture, preservation of the Santhali music, art, dance, language and instruments assumes significance. It can aid younger generations in learning about Santhali heritage and lifestyle, providing them much-needed exposure to the diversity that India as a nation represents.

An essential step toward preserving the Santhali culture and tradition was the establishment of the "Museum of Santal Culture" in Bishnubati, Santiniketan, West Bengal, in 2008. It is locally known as *Aricali Jogao Bakhol*. The *Ghosaldanga Adibasi Seva Sangha* was instrumental in achieving this feat, undertaken to attract the interest and involvement of

the Santali communities in preserving and extending awareness about their culture for learning and utilization by future generations. Dr Boro Baski, Managing Trustee, GBAT (Ghosaldanga Bishnubati Adibasi Trust), opines that the museum can be a motivation for the community to move forward towards modernity without abandoning one's Santal mentality and traditional high points.

The significance of the museum lies in the fact that it is built by the community from scratch and maintained by them. All families living in the area contribute to the maintenance work of the museum. Most of the items in the museum are donated by Santal families from various villages in West Bengal, Jharkhand and Odisha. Over a decade since its inception, the museum has been strengthening the cultural confidence of the community. Moreover, it has become an information centre for neighbours from other villages and people in the academic field. Initially, The Indian Museum, Kolkata supported the *Ghosaldanga Adivasi Seva Sangha* financially and technologically to establish the museum.

This is an example of the preservation of nuances of the Santhali folk culture and traditions through physical infrastructure development. Setting up of such has its advantages and disadvantages. The principal among the latter is cost and time. Building such a facility and collating all probable items representing facets of the tradition require significant funding, time investment and overcoming geographical challenges. All or any of these can pose vital challenges in infrastructure development.

Additionally, another problem associated with physical preservation centres is their immobility. People must travel to a specific place to view what is on display. Those who cannot travel remain deprived of viewing the cultural treasures.

All of the above impediments are adequately addressed by social media. It offers a cost-effective route to virtual preservation centres, accessible to all. Resources are

accessible from anywhere at any point in time. Levering the signs of progress in technology, a specific website has consistently endeavoured to preserve India's tribal culture and heritage. The 'Indian Tribal Heritage' platform has several electronic books and journal editions documenting different facets of the Santhali culture, tradition and language. The website hosts an e-book on *Banam*, the traditional musical instrument of the tribal group and how Santhals celebrate the different seasons via their dance, music and art forms. These books also document the activities undertaken by the Ashadullapur Gramin Silpa and Sastha Bidhan Kendra, both of which use creative ways to preserve the Santhali culture and be instrumental in its spread across territories and generations. The website also includes papers by scholars and activists about Santhali culture, linguistic heritage, village development activities and such topics. These act as ready reference materials and are accessible to anyone and everyone harbouring an interest in knowing more about this old tribal populace.

Another noteworthy initiative is *Fagun*, the only Santhali language monthly publication launched in Bhubaneswar in 2008. Mangat Murmu and his wife Malati undertook this initiative to aid the preservation process of the Santhali language and ensure its circulation in the present-day scenario. Having completed over a decade of its existence, the newspaper is doing its bit to protect the traditional tribal language and literature produced in it. In the initial days, the publication owner undertook the printing of merely 500 copies at a press that operated manually. Nevertheless, with time, both circulation and readership have increased. Currently, over 5000 copies are printed monthly, and circulation happens across Cuttack, Guwahati, Kolkata, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Chennai, Bhagalpur, Mumbai, Ranchi, Visakhapatnam and others (Burman 2021).

In 'Santhali Language in the Digital Media Space', authors Shalini Mahapatra and Itishri Sarangi identify some of the initiatives undertaken in digital space to preserve and widely make the Santhali language. A case in point is the Santhal language page introduced by Wikipedia in 2018, making it the first tribal and folk language to have a dedicated offering on the platform. The edition is available on Wikipedia in the 'Ol Chiki' script and contains contributions from Santhal members residing in Nepal, India and Bangladesh. It is accessible on https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santali_language. In addition, developers have also come up with a Santhali Keyboard Assistance, which enables users to compose their Facebook comments, Twitter content, blogs and such in the traditional Ol Chiki script.

A significant initiative, notes Mahapatra and Sarangi, is the launch of the portal Storyweaver by Pratham Books, a leading publisher. Available on the platform is a collection of 34 stories in the Ol Chiki script, another 27 stories in the Devanagari script of the Santhal tradition, and 76 composed in the Bengali Santhal dialect. The platform is circulating these via several digital libraries, accessible from around the globe. It signifies digital documentation of the traditional literature of Santhals, and also it is spread across societies. For ease of users, available titles have been segregated according to the appropriate age of readers, resulting in categories like early readers, middle readers, advanced readers and such.

YouTube has further enabled the preservation and circulation of Santhali culture through its repository of films, songs, music albums, audio-visual productions and shows on current affairs available for those interested in exploring more. Since most Santhali films are produced on a low budget and do not have theatrical releases due to distribution problems, YouTube has emerged as a boon enabling the distribution of such content far and wide. It also presents a route through which producers can earn from their investments. Nearly all

movies produced annually are available on the YouTube platform, thus making the latest productions available to viewers.

Conclusion

With time, an initiative undertaken by a Santhali couple, on their own accord and a limited scale, is evolving into a movement of sorts and gathering momentum. Today, *Fagun* connects Santhali people, spread across regions, countries, and continents, to their roots and traditions. In addition, it also enables younger generations to learn about their traditional language and culture, thereby inculcating a feeling of association and pride. Leveraging the signs of progress of technology, the publisher couple can plan an online edition, which will enable them to take *Fagun* to a broader reader base and archive every edition. It can be referred to in case of need in future. With technology providing the tools and bandwidth required to achieve this end, the day may not be far when *Fagun* will have its online edition. That online medium effectively preserves traditions and cultures has been clarified by several examples. The Indian Tribal Heritage website is relevant today as a documentation storehouse of different aspects of Santhali tradition and culture in e-books and e-journals, which anyone can assess at any point in time. This provides permanency and immortality to the Santhali language, its art forms, music, folklore and other cultural aspects. In addition, such archiving makes it possible for people from different parts of the globe to know more about this old Indian tribe and its cultural heritage by simply assessing the online materials available. Hopefully, this will trigger greater engagement and discussions around the group's practices, customs, and culture, sustaining engagement and preventing the age-old traditions from becoming extinct.

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