

Role of New Media in preserving the dying folklore tradition of Phoonga-Wari in Manipur

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ABSTRACT

With the advancement in technology and modern development, age old customs which have existed since time immemorial are slowly losing relevance. Phoonga-Wari (to be pronounce as Phung-ga-wari), a folklore tradition of the Meitei community of Manipur is gradually dying out. The younger generation are more immersed in the world of smartphones, games and internet. This research has been conducted amongst school students to discover the current importance of folklore in their lives. A survey was disseminated to 100 students from various schools based in Imphal. The results of the survey indicated that the respondents were very much aware of the digital content of Phoonga-Wari that exists nowadays. In terms of the type of content, animated videos with narration were more preferred and deemed interesting. This will go a long way in preserving the dying tradition of Phoonga-Wari if more digital content were to be created and uploaded for consumption.

Keywords: New Media, Folklore tradition, Folktale preservation, Meiteis, Phoonga-Wari

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 New Media

The **New Media Institute** defines new media as “a catchall term used to define all that is related to the internet and the interplay between technology, images and sound”. This can include podcasts, video/audio streaming sites, computer games, news article, wikis, social media networks and many more.

In today's age, digital media, social media, online media are just some of the terms that have easily become household names. The emergence of these terms can be traced back to the shift from analogue to digital technology. The old and traditional media like newspapers, radio, television got their digital counterparts. Thus, new media was born. The ease in acquiring and accessibility of this content surely cannot be overlooked. It only takes a device such as a smartphone, a laptop or a desktop which has a connection to the Internet in order to access it.

Besides being completely digital, it is also highly interactive in nature. Communication process became two-way. Contrary to traditional media, the creation and distribution of new media content is undoubtedly more convenient and hassle free. After all, it is ready to be consumed anytime and anywhere.

1.2 Meitei Community

Manipur is a hilly state situated in the north-eastern region of India. The state has a total population of almost 3 million. The native communities comprised of the Meiteis, the Nagas and the Kuki/Zomi tribes. Meiteis are the major ethnic group of the State and constitute about 53% of the total population. They reside primarily in the valley area known as Imphal which is also the capital of Manipur. Their language is called Meiteilon.

The Meiteis have a rich treasure trove of culture ranging from age old customs and rituals to various art forms and handicrafts, folk songs, dances and theatre. Festivals rooted in tradition and indigenous beliefs like Lai Haraoba, Cheiraoba and Yaoshang are widely celebrated by the locals. Manipuri dances like the Ras Lila, Nupa Pala, Pung Cholom, Maibi Jagoi and Khamba Thoibi Jagoi are renowned on the international stage too. Folk songs such as Pena Eshei, Khullang Eshei to name a few, have important underlying messages interwoven in the lyrics. Handicraft and pottery products made of indigenous materials namely Kouna and Nungbi are famous and sought after by foreign buyers as well.

1.3 Phoonga-Wari

Since time immemorial, there has existed a custom of oral narration of folklore by the older members of a household to the younger ones. This will primarily take place around the Phoonga which stood for 'fire place' or 'fire hearth' in the Meitei language.

In ancient times, there would always be two fire places in a Meitei household. One is in the kitchen which is only accessible to the person who is in charge of cooking the meals. It is regarded as sacred hence it was only allowed for those family members who have taken a bath. And the second fire place is called the Phoonga. It is located in the common area which is accessible to all. This particular fire place is kept burning at all times throughout the day and is mainly used for boiling water or to act as a heat source for the entire house. Around this Phoonga, the elderly members and the younger children tends to spend most of their time during which the former will orally narrate traditional folktales to the later. Hence the term, Phoonga-Wari which means narration of stories around the fire place came about.

1.4 Present status of Phoonga-Wari

With the advent of modernization, traditional fire places got replaced with gas stoves and electric heaters and the age-old custom of Phoonga-Wari came to a halt. The younger generation of today are only getting immersed in the world of Mobile phones, video and computer games, cartoon shows, etc. while most would not even be aware of the earlier tradition of Phoonga-Wari. However, there is a gradual revival currently going on with avid culture enthusiasts and talented individuals coming together to upload Phoonga-Wari content on YouTube and Facebook with animations and voice over narration, the likes of which have never been done before in Manipur.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This research attempts to:

- ❖ Determine the current relevance of Phoonga-Wari amongst the younger generation

- ❖ Determine their awareness and knowledge of the digital content of Phoonga-Wari
- ❖ Examine the efficacy of the mentioned digital content over the younger audience
- ❖ Access which nature of digital content, the younger audience would find it more interesting to consume

3. RESEARCH QUESTION

This research aims to discover whether new media can play a role in preserving the dying folklore tradition of Phoonga-Wari in Manipur.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Folklore is a practice of sharing and passing down myths, legends, beliefs and stories from one generation to another typically through word of mouth. It has a strong cultural background and exists in many communities in all parts of the world.

“Folktales as a cultural object and design should be protected as a cultural heritage and communicated to future generations” (Ekici and Fedakar, 2004).

In the book, *Children’s Literature in the Elementary School*, Huck, Hepler and Hickman states that “Folktales allow students to experience one of the ways a society develops a sense of moral behaviour in its children”. Folktales are akin to “a mirror that allows viewers to reflect more clearly on aspects of their own culture” (Zarnowski and F. Gallagher, 1993).

Researches are continuously conducted to ensure that children like folktales since they are a means to carry forward “memory of humanity” to the future” (Ekici and Fedakar, 2004).

“The oldest method of delivering folktales is verbally, with stories usually being read by the elders before a child goes to sleep. However, due to a more modern lifestyle and by living in a digital era, parents may forget to spend quality time with their children and may allow technology to replace their roles in the home by feeding their child with computer games and the Internet” (Masmuzidin, Jiang and Wan, 2011).

However, it is interesting to note that a preliminary study conducted on Malay school children, discovered that the children were more interested in folktales if they were cartooned or animated as opposed to more conventional methods (Ibrahim, Ahmad and Shafie, 2014).

“Since transfer of tradition into contemporary world requires special effort, national cultural policies should adopt this effort even further, more traditional folk texts should be transferred to audio-visual communication media, and artists, musicians, movie makers, and the last but not the least, authors and poets should be encouraged for this process” (Ekici and Fedakar, 2004).

It should be the need of the hour for “folklorists to accept the study of folklore and technologically-mediated communication as a valuable area of inquiry” (Blank, 2014).

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

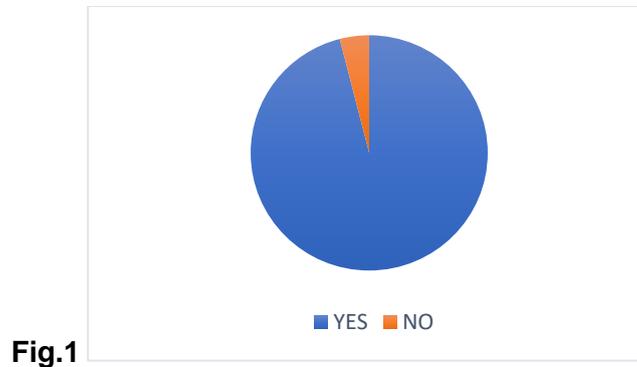
The survey was in the form of a questionnaire containing 10 close ended questions. Rather than distributing it online through Google Form or any other application, a physical distribution of the questionnaires was opted for, in order to accumulate more responses over a short period of time.

The location of my survey was based in Imphal since this is where the Meiteis mainly reside. The questionnaires were physically distributed at different schools. The target group of my survey was aimed at students from Class 9 to 12. The students were encouraged to share the questionnaires further amongst their own respective circles at their hostel lodgings and coaching centres so as to rope in more respondents.

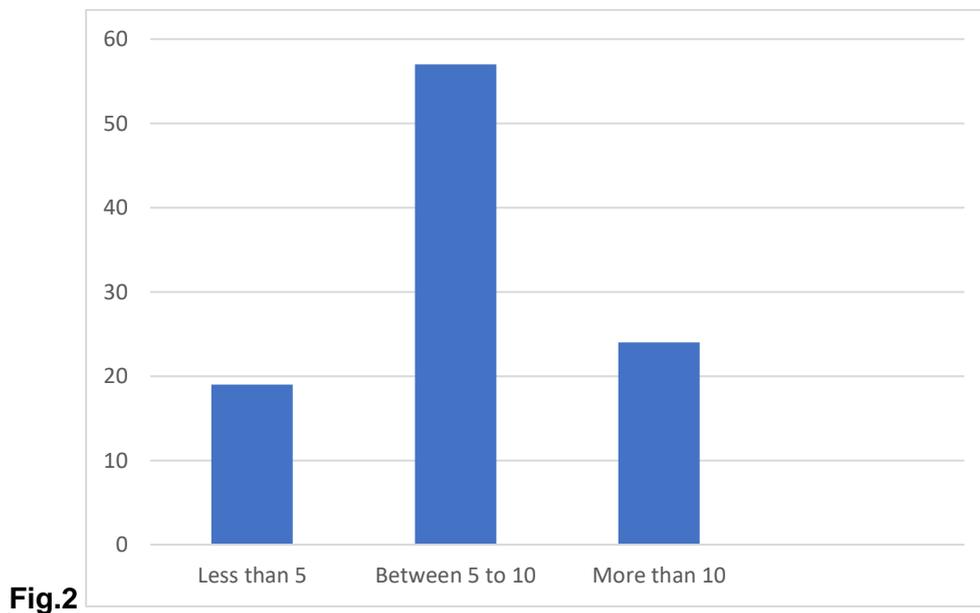
A total of 100 questionnaires were received back duly filled. The data collected had been converted into percentages and represented as charts and tables for analysis. They are provided below under the heading of results and findings.

6. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

- From the 100 respondents, 96 claimed of knowing Phoonga-Wari while growing up versus 4 who claimed they did not know (Ref.Fig.1).



- Upon being enquired how many Phoonga-Wari folktales were they aware of, a majority of 57 students chose between 5 to 10, 24 students chose more than 10 and 19 students chose less than 5 (Ref.Fig.2).



- 59 students stated grandparents as the source of their knowledge of folktales, 37 students chose parents and in turn followed by 3 students who chose friends and 1 student opted for tutor as their sources respectively (Ref.Fig.3).

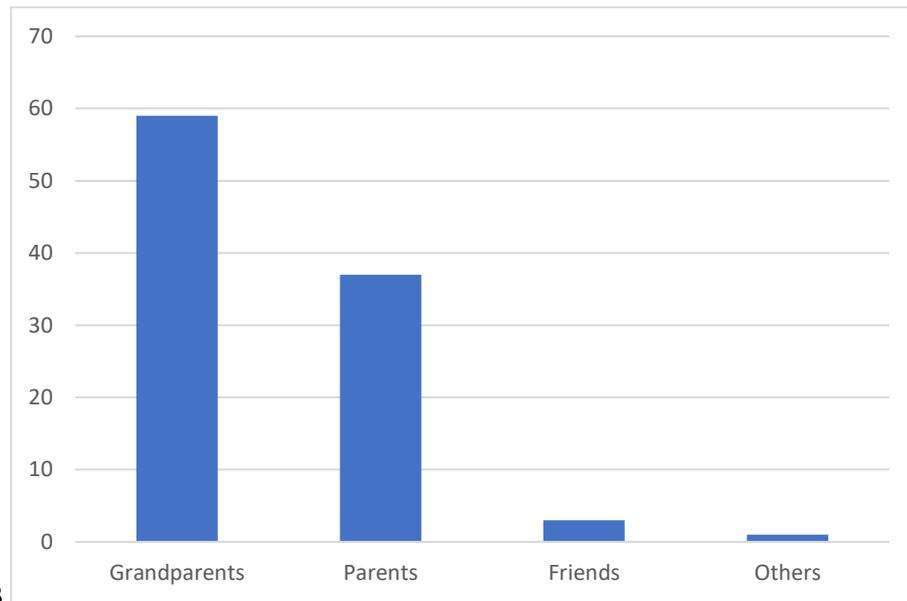


Fig.3

- Majority of the students, 54 to be precise, stated that the Phoonga doesn't exist in their households anymore while 46 students stated that their households are still in possession of the Phoonga (Ref.Fig.4).



Fig.4

- Regarding the location of folktale narration during their time of growing up, 35 students chose fireplace, 37 students chose bedroom, 15 students chose kitchen and 13 students chose living room (Ref.Fig.5).

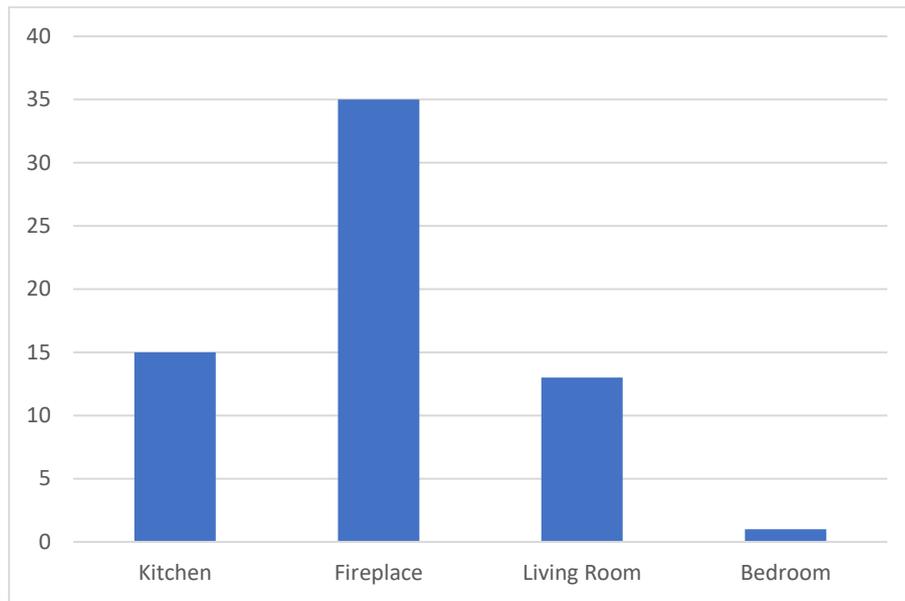


Fig.5

- Based on how they choose to spend the majority of their free or recreational time, 37 students chose surfing the internet, 32 students chose interacting with their family members, 11 students chose watching television, 10 students opted for chatting with their friends online and lastly another 10 students opted for playing video games (Ref.Fig.6).

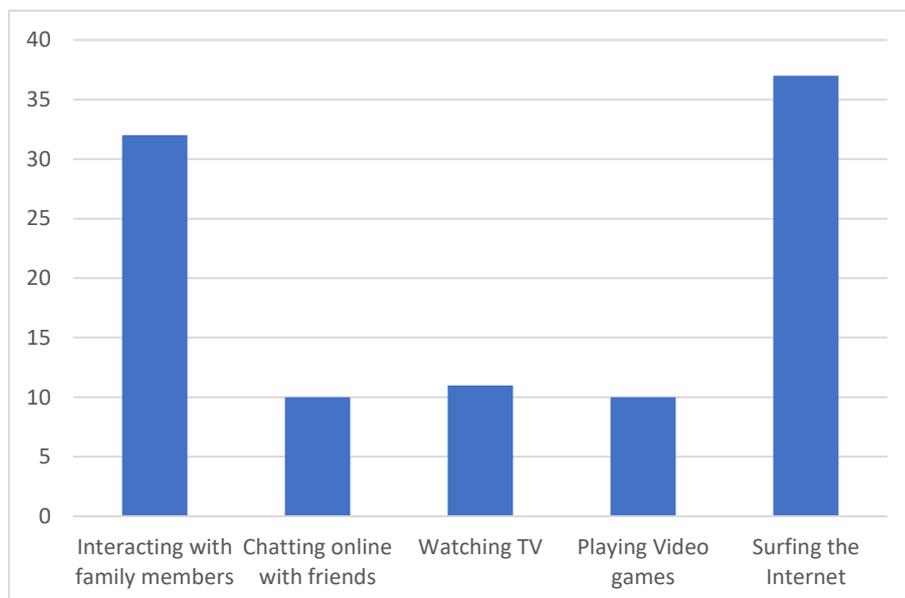


Fig.6

- Surprisingly, 76 students stated that they were aware of the digital content of Phoonga Wari that exists nowadays while 24 students stated they were not aware (Ref.Fig.7).

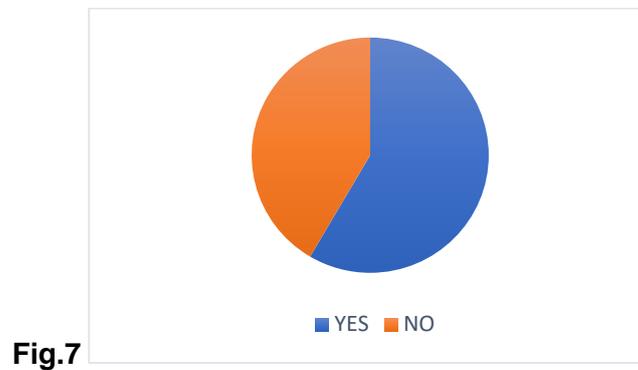


Fig.7

- Regarding the type of digital content of Phoonga Wari which will be more interesting to them, 73 students chose YouTube video with narration and animation, 20 students chose visual comic and 7 students chose podcasts (Ref.Fig.8).

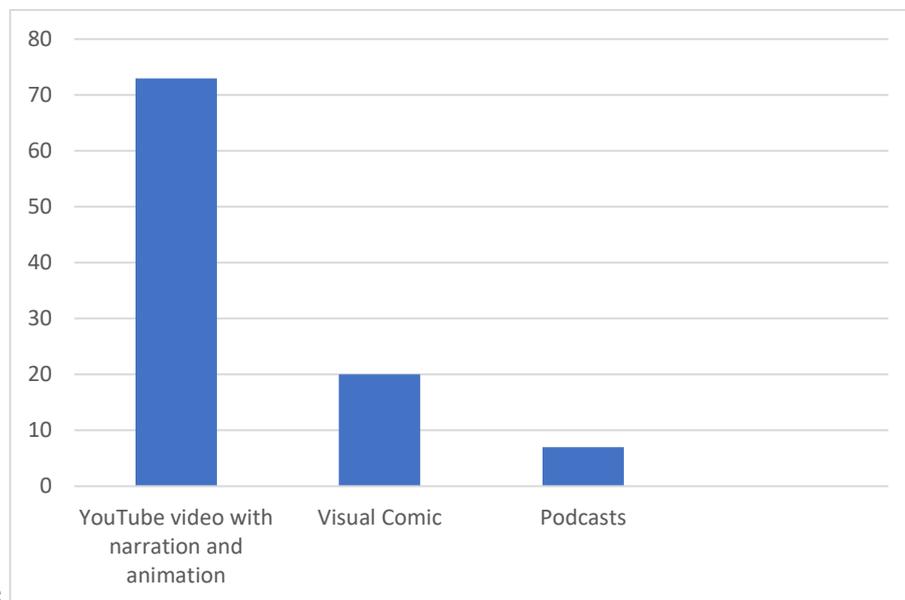


Fig. 8

- Whether the rise in digital content will induce the younger audience to show more interest in folklore, 95 students chose yes and 5 students chose no (Ref.Fig.9).



Fig.9

- Last but not the least, 94 students stated that the rise of digital content will help in the preservation of Phoonga Wari from dying out while 6 students stated in the negative (Ref.Fig.10).



Fig.10

7. CONCLUSION

Folktales and folklore will always be a huge part of learning culture while growing up. This is a chance for the child to absorb wisdom and moral lessons from the elders in the family. It also acts as an activity of bonding and relationship building for the ones involved. Phoonga-Wari was one such beautiful tradition.

As mentioned earlier, the age of modernization has gradually led to the decline of this particular tradition. The younger generation these days are very tech savvy. Unlike the days of the past, they prefer to spend more time indulging in activities online than in their physical environment. This has increased more so with the birth of the pandemic since it made online

classes a mandate during the lockdown. This has led to a visible gap between the younger generation and the older generation in a family as the former spends more time on their smartphones, computers, and tablets.

From the survey, we came to know that a majority of the respondents were aware of Phoonga-Wari while growing up and most claimed to know between 5 to 10 stories. It was heartening to see that grandparents were chosen by the majority as their source of Phoonga-Wari knowledge. We could still see the symbolic relation of narrating folklore with the fireplace since a huge percentage of respondents stated fireplace as the main location for storytelling.

Another interesting observation was that the majority of the respondents were aware of the digital content of Phoonga-Wari that has cropped up over major platforms like YouTube and Facebook. This stands testament to the fact that the younger generation are very much aware of what goes on online. This was also very indicative from the survey data which stated that 37% out of 100 were in favour of surfing the Internet during their free and recreational time which goes on to show how much of an online presence they have. The survey also revealed that the respondents prefer YouTube video with narration and animation more than the other options of visual comic and podcast. This favouritism on animation and cartoons were similarly echoed in other researches conducted on children in other parts of the world.

A final takeaway from the survey, was the positive affirmation given by a huge percentage of the respondents, 95% to be precise, who stated that the presence of digital content of Phoonga-Wari will induce them to be show more interest to folktales.

This attribute of the younger generation can be a blessing in disguise for the preservation of Phoonga-Wari through digital content. All in all, we can safely conclude that new media will indeed play an important role in preserving the dying tradition of Phoonga-Wari for the future generations to come.

8. LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE

Since this research relies on a standard questionnaire, the findings could not be more specific in certain areas. An in-depth analysis can be undertaken to understand a niche area, for instance comparing which digital platforms are more effective in appealing to the younger generation. The strengths and weaknesses of a particular platform can be studied more.

In addition, the survey was open to any student residing in the city of Imphal so there was not any pre-requisite to belong to any socio-economic strata or demographic details hence the findings of this research will be too broad to draw up a more specific conclusion on any students hailing from a certain background. This will also be important to observe the digital divide amongst the younger generation since most of the students belonging to impoverished backgrounds might not have the same access to digital technologies in the form of smartphone, tablets, laptops or even a stable internet connection so further research can be carried out.

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