

Preserving South Asian Tribal Legacies: Exploring Oral Traditions, Traditional Spoken Narratives, and Folk Tales

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ABSTRACT

In South Asia, spoken narratives and folktales act as intangible forms of knowledge transfer. However, in recent years, the region’s once-flourishing oral culture has been sidelined by imperialism, modernization, and the dominance of print and tangible archives. Despite this, some tribes have managed to preserve their oral archives and continue to sustain the process of knowledge transfer through the spoken word. This paper delves into examples of such communities and argues that they challenge several Western premises while exercising agency over their own epistemic material. Additionally, the paper highlights the need to decolonize archival efforts in the digital age and suggests ways in which scholars can ensure that a tribe’s knowledge systems are appropriately showcased, shared, and represented.

Keywords: Folktales, Intangible archives, Lived traditions, Orality, Tribal knowledge

INTRODUCTION

Across academic fields, history is commonly extracted from objects, documents, books, artworks, and other materials preserved intergenerationally. Though such sources offer critical insights, the bias towards physical archives often overlooks another important form of knowledge transfer—intangible archives. This holds particular relevance in South Asia, where oral traditions, spoken narratives, and folktales have been widely practiced for centuries and revered as intangible carriers of knowledge.

Several attempts have been made to translate the historic and epistemic relevance of oral traditions. As Hulan & Eigenbrod (2008) put it, oral tales involve “connecting speaker and listener in communal experience and uniting past and present in memory” (p. 7). Similarly, Ong (2002) argues that oral cultures, unlike written documents, do not perceive the past as an “itemized terrain” (p. 96). Instead, they see it as “the domain of the ancestors, a resonant source for renewing awareness of present existence”. So much so that early versions of the region’s great epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharata, are still preserved orally today, with many hymns taking on specific tones and rhythms (Singh & South Asia Foundation, 2007, p. 5).

However, when the Western lens turned to examine oral histories in the 1970s, many criticized it, claiming oral methods were “unreliable” compared to the written word (Thane, 1999). Today, this divide can be seen as emblematic of a central lapse in Eurocentric and Western thought, where the construction of knowledge is frequently pinned down by imperial and colonial assumptions. In South Asia, these notions disproportionately affect the preservation of the region’s tribal legacies, where oral traditions, spoken narratives, and folktales have long been used to sustain histories, cultures, and identities.

Moving towards decolonization, this paper argues, is necessary not just to uplift these historically silenced perspectives but also to decenter the idea that communities without a written history are, by virtue, “ahistoric” or “people without a history”. In doing so, this paper will also shed light on the ways in which cultural elements have been carefully safeguarded and passed down through generations by tribal societies. In fact, the need to protect intangible cultural heritage was even advanced by UNESCO to ensure its protection not just in South Asia but across the world.

In recent decades, some tribes have adopted the written word. However, orality still has strong ties to tribal identity. By exploring its formation and preservation across generations, this paper will ultimately reveal how tribal knowledge acts as a self-contained archive that powerfully challenges both Western and national assumptions.

BACKGROUND

Before the meteoric rise of print and publishing culture in South Asia during the 19th century, many societies solely relied on the oral form—from the Santhal tribe of Eastern India to the Baloch tribe in Balochistan, as well as the native tribes of the Andaman Islands. Even today, it is reported that unwritten languages in countries like India far outnumber the written ones.

In simple terms, oral tradition in tribal communities can be seen as the collective breadth of knowledge systems produced and preserved by members. This encompasses the stories, poems, folktales, and other cultural material that is transmitted and preserved from one generation to another through the use of spoken word. Outside these spaces though, orality has often been unfairly pitted against the written text and perceived as outdated. When the term folklore was first published in the West in 1846, it was immediately framed as “uncivilized.” In fact, William John Thoms, who coined folklore, defined it as “the traditional institutions, beliefs, art, customs, stories, songs, sayings and other life current among backward peoples or retained by the less cultured classes of more advanced peoples” (Dorson, 1983, p. xi).

While it can be said that past scholarship was largely responsible for the othering of orality from historiography, it is by no means an exclusive product of the Western gaze. Under national confines too, Adivasi knowledge forms have been drastically overshadowed, receiving far less scholarship and interest compared to their mainland counterparts (Nayak, 2016). Even in cases where Adivasi folklore and oral narratives are explored, they are rarely analyzed as legitimate sources of historic and epistemic insights.

Secondly, when reclaiming the status of orality as a historical record, it is equally imperative to understand that these narratives are not a mere archive of the past but a synchronous knowledge system. This is because viewing oral tales and folklore as a preserved relic, as Richmond (1957) argues, mischaracterizes them as a remnant of the past with no place or relevance in today’s modern world. Lastly, an examination of the fate of the subaltern subject is also relevant here (Spivak, 1988). Failing to apply politics of representation in decolonization efforts risks perpetuating false assumptions that tribes cannot preserve their own narratives, which undermines their autonomy and impedes the revitalization of oral traditions. Today, many oral traditions suffer from a lack of institutionalized support, which is worsened in cases where intergenerational transfer has been affected by politics of imperialism and modernization. Addressing these issues is imperative to recognize, acknowledge, and actively preserve South Asia’s rich tribal legacies.

DISCUSSION

Historically, the term “South Asia” emerged from American foreign policy and had little meaning for local populations (Kaviraj, 2014). Borders, much like language, identity, and culture, were fluid. This porousness is also evident in oral cultures, where the absence of a fixed form and the lack of a singular author have enabled stories to be modified across spaces and contexts. This is also the case for the oral tradition of the Baloch, an ethnic group from Balochistan, whose deep and long history of orality is now divided among three separate nations: Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan.

Before the British intervened in the 19th century with a Latin-based Balochi alphabet, Balochi was an unwritten language. Because of this, oral tradition was a crucial marker of their cultural identity. So much so that homes would often transform into storytelling spaces where long winter nights became “short” simply because of the sheer repertoire the tribe’s storytellers held (Badalkhan, 2003, p. 232). “Very rare was the night with no storytelling”, he explains, “there was no concept of refusing the favor of telling tales to each other” (p. 233).

However, in addition to British intervention, other factors, like some groups turning to the Arabic script, the advent of modernization, and the Afghan fundamentalist movement, all affected the process of knowledge transfer among the Balochi people. As a result, their oral tradition is now considered to be fast diminishing. Coupled with no new minstrels seen in the recent past, there is an urgent need to archive and preserve the repository held by existing minstrels, a small, fast-aging group.

Even within national boundaries, oral traditions appear to face a similar uncertain future. When new scientific theory was produced during the 1960s—70s in postcolonial India, many pre-existing lived traditions, which encompass oral and folk culture, were not given a rightful place in academia (Chatterjee, 1993, 2010). Oral stories, however, can challenge such historiography. Take the Ao-Naga folktale of Champichanglangba, where the presence of magic does not negate science but rather textures it. The legendary Champichanglangba, as the story goes, has healing powers. However, these powers also intersect with ethnobotanical realities (Changkija, 1994, p. 256). For example, Champichanglangba’s magic is believed

to flow in sungza sung, a plant that lends its wood to medicines, its soaked chips to remedy an ailing stomach, and its inner bark to make belts.

Similarly, tribal populations on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands were able to retreat to higher ground and escape the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami because of oral stories that developed from previous earthquakes and handed down from generation to generation. Despite just 100 or so remaining people in the Onge tribe, all of them survived the disaster owing to folklore which warns of a "huge shaking of ground followed by high wall of water" (Bhaumik, 2005).

This dynamic relationship and interconnectedness between folklore and the world at large has allowed several tribes to preserve their stories as rightful historical processes, despite a lack of institutionalized support. This preservation can further be discerned in the Kurumba tribe of Nilgiris, whose stories blend into a rich archive that documents their settlements, complex events, as well as social evolutions.

Women from the community are also story-telling experts who create rich narratives on Kurumba history. One such tale performed in a village, Gopalakrishnan (2010) notes, shows the strong historical character of such archives by pointing out its similarities with the story of Tipu sultan, where "an alien with suit and hat, who demands the people to surrender, will be killed by the tiger" (p. 684). Another centers around a woman who takes up the task of harvesting honey. Unbeknownst to her though, a few jealous men decide to cut the rope she was using to climb, leading to her death. Such tales, Gopalakrishnan (2010) argues, demonstrate how folklore can offer an intimate glimpse into social customs and the evolution of the status of women.

Even when oral tradition suffers under external influences, it still manages to excavate its oral roots. This is the case for the Naga people who reside in Northeastern India. Historically, Nagaland's tribal voices were censored, undermined, and erased during colonial and post-colonial periods. As a result, several contemporary authors from the community have now turned to orality as a way to reinvolve their community's rich knowledge systems (Chatterjee et al., 2022). Especially because the Ao-Naga oral tradition "is not a mere form of 'story-telling' as opposed to a written, recorded version. It is indeed in many ways the source of the people's literature, social customs, religion, and history" (Dutta, 1999, p. vii).

In recent decades, more and more indigenous communities have also started to lead the efforts to preserve their legacies in a rapidly changing world. Arunachal Pradesh's Wancho community, for example, has made notable headway in this regard. With the help of a researcher, several community elders from this 57,000-member tribe have begun recording and digitizing their traditional folktales (Outlook, 2022). As outside influences like urbanization and modernization continue to affect the intergenerational transmission link between young and old community members, projects like this allow tribes to harness the digital world as a means to preserve their lived traditions.

Such external projects should, however, address broader ethical and representational concerns while documenting tribal histories. With a recent push towards digital archives, Digital Dynamics Across Cultures, an archive on the Warumungu people of Central Australia, offers vital insights that can be applied to local South Asian contexts. Here, archivists set out to modify and alter a viewer's access to content as a way to reflect the local community's wishes. Under this ingenious approach, Lorea (2018) noted how some photos would only be partially viewable after the subject's death, a video clip would pause halfway denoting that it was restricted by gender, and audio clips were halted midway because it could only be listened to by those who had undergone an initiation ritual.

Such projects offer a promising glimpse into how digital archives can work with the owners of tribal legacies, ultimately ensuring that their customs, culture, beliefs, and wishes, are not sidestepped by preservation efforts.

CONCLUSION

Preserving and safeguarding oral narratives and folklore is vital to ensuring the richness of human experience survives for generations to come. Among South Asian tribes, oral stories, spoken narratives, and folktales act as intangible forms of knowledge transfer. As argued in the paper, before any preservation efforts are undertaken it is essential to understand the nature of oral traditions, their marginalization under imperialism, colonization, and globalization, as well as the agency of those who own tribal legacies. The latter becomes a critical factor in this process, allowing indigenous communities the autonomy and agency to actively participate in safeguarding their own cultural heritage.

In the case of such partnerships, archivists should strive to build a free and open dialogue with communities. Doing so can ensure that a tribe's knowledge systems are appropriately showcased, shared, and represented. By engaging in such

meaningful exchanges, archivists can contribute to the broader goal of not just preserving narratives but also facilitating a way for the rest of the world to understand and interact with tribal legacies.

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