



Reviving the Forgotten Voices: Indigenous Oral Traditions and Identity Reclamation among Indian Tribes.

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Abstract

Indigenous tribes across India possess vast reservoirs of oral knowledge that have shaped their cultural identities for centuries. These oral traditions comprising myths, songs, folklore, praise poetry, ritual expressions, and performance arts serve as the living archives through which communities remember their histories and articulate their worldviews. Yet, these traditions have been threatened by colonisation, linguistic displacement, and global cultural homogenisation, leading to widespread cultural erosion. This paper examines the contemporary movement of indigenous identity reclamation and explores how reviving oral traditions strengthens cultural pride, restores historical agency, and reinforces community cohesion. It argues that revitalising orature is not a nostalgic return to the past but an active, dynamic form of cultural resistance and self-determination.

Keywords: Indigenous tribes, oral traditions, identity reclamation, orature, cultural memory

Introduction

Across generations, Indian tribal communities have relied on oral traditions to transmit knowledge, values, and collective memory. Unlike written cultures, where knowledge is archived in texts, tribal communities embed their histories in living memory through storytelling, songs, and ritual performance. Oral narratives are fluid, adaptable, and deeply rooted in community participation, making them uniquely suited to express indigenous identity.

However, with rapid socio-economic transformations, these traditions are increasingly endangered. Modern education systems often exclude indigenous knowledge; migration disrupts traditional community structures; and digital media consumption has overshadowed local storytelling practices. Yet, these same forces have sparked new movements of preservation and reclamation. Tribal communities today are actively reasserting their cultural identities by revitalising traditional songs, documenting ancestral stories, forming cultural associations, and engaging in literary activism.

The present paper explores how indigenous oral traditions serve as the foundation for cultural identity and how their revival is central to contemporary identity reclamation efforts among Indian tribes.

Research Questions

1. How do oral traditions act as repositories of cultural identity and collective memory among Indian tribal communities?
2. What socio-political and historical forces have disrupted or weakened indigenous oral traditions?
3. How are tribes across India reclaiming their identity through the revival and reinterpretation of oral literature?
4. What is the role of community participation, performance, and intergenerational transmission in sustaining oral traditions?
5. In what ways can institutional and academic support enhance the preservation of indigenous orature?

Research Objectives

1. To analyse the deep cultural significance of indigenous orature in identity formation.
2. To study the threats to tribal oral traditions due to historical, linguistic, and socio-political factors.
3. To explore community-led and scholarly efforts aimed at reviving and preserving tribal oral heritage.
4. To evaluate the contribution of oral traditions to contemporary movements of identity reclamation.
5. To highlight the role of performance, storytelling, and ritual practice in reinforcing tribal selfhood.

Review of Literature

Scholars across disciplines have recognised the importance of oral traditions in sustaining indigenous identity. Walter J. Ong's theory of *primary orality* emphasises the communal and performative nature of oral cultures, where memory and knowledge are preserved through repetition, formulaic structures, and participation. Albert Lord's work highlights how oral narratives function as living epics, dynamically shaped by storytellers.

Indian scholarship adds a socio-cultural dimension to this global framework. Ganesh Devy's *People's Linguistic Survey of India* reveals the alarming decline of tribal languages many of which are intrinsically tied to oral traditions. Nandini Sundar and Virginius Xaxa discuss the political marginalisation of tribal communities and the cultural disruptions caused by state policies. Ethnographic studies on tribes such as the Gonds, Santals, Bhils, Nagas, and Banjaras highlight the centrality of oral forms in preserving history, spirituality, and kinship systems.

In recent years, the growth of Adivasi literature in which tribal writers articulate their experiences in their own voices has given new visibility to oral narratives, transforming them into tools of cultural affirmation and political assertion.

Indigenous Oral Traditions: Cultural and Social Foundations

Oral Literature as Cultural Memory

For indigenous communities, oral traditions are not merely artistic expressions; they encapsulate collective memory. Origin myths explain the creation of the world, while migration stories record ancestral journeys and social transformations. These narratives root individuals in the larger flow of community history, giving them

a sense of belonging.

Ecological Knowledge

Many tribal stories articulate deep ecological relationships. Folktales warn against exploiting nature; ritual songs honour forest spirits; agricultural chants synchronise human activity with the seasons. Oral traditions thus serve as ecological education systems.

Moral and Social Values

Stories function as ethical guides. Through humour, metaphor, and symbolic characters, oral narratives impart lessons on honesty, courage, hospitality, and community responsibility. Proverbs and riddles also reinforce social norms.

Performance as Identity

Performative traditions drumming, dance, chanting, shadow puppetry, and festival enactments embody communal identity. Performance spaces become sites where collective memory is enacted, reaffirmed, and transmitted.

Threats to Indigenous Oral Traditions

Colonial Knowledge Systems

Colonial ethnographers often recorded tribal stories inaccurately, extracting them from their cultural contexts and reshaping them to fit colonial narratives. This distorted representation weakened the authority of indigenous voices.

Linguistic Suppression

The imposition of dominant languages in schools, governance, and media has led to the decline of tribal languages. Since oral traditions depend on language rhythm, idioms, and metaphors, linguistic loss directly affects the continuity of orature.

Modernisation and Urbanisation

Migration to towns and cities fragments community life, reducing opportunities for storytelling. Urbanised youths often feel detached from traditional stories, creating generational gaps.

Digital Overload

Global media influences have overshadowed local forms of entertainment. Children spend more time with screens than with elders who carry oral knowledge.

Displacement

Mining projects, deforestation, and land acquisition displace tribal communities, disrupting the socio-political ecosystems necessary for sustaining oral traditions.

Identity Reclamation Through the Revival of Orature

Community-led Revitalisation

Tribes across India have begun organising cultural gatherings where elders narrate stories, teach traditional songs, and perform rituals. This intergenerational transmission restores community pride and strengthens identity.

Documentation and Archiving

Digital tools such as audio recordings, community radio programs, and video archives are enabling the preservation of rare stories. Universities and NGOs collaborate with tribal communities to create ethnographic archives.

Literary Transformation

Many tribal writers today draw from oral heritage to produce poetry, fiction, and memoirs. This not only preserves old narratives but also reinterprets them in contemporary contexts, challenging stereotypes.

Festivals and Cultural Platforms

Events like Adivasi literature festivals, cultural fairs, and state-sponsored tribal festivals showcase oral performances, enhancing visibility and recognition.

Counter-Histories

Oral narratives help communities reclaim their past, offering alternative historical perspectives to mainstream narratives. For example, origin myths resist narratives of primitiveness and instead assert indigenous sovereignty and continuity.

Illustrative Case Studies Across India

Gonds

Gond Pardhan bards use the *Gond Ramayani* and *Lingo Pen* narratives to preserve genealogies, moral codes, and spiritual worldviews. These are performed with musical instruments like the *bana*, making oral tradition a performative ritual.

Santals

Santal creation myths (such as the tale of Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Budhi) and festivals like Sohrai function as cultural anchors that reinforce community bonds and ecological relationships.

Nagas

Naga war chants, harvest songs, and clan histories reveal complex social organisation and memory systems. Their storytelling traditions strengthen clan identity and intergenerational ties.

Banjaras (Lambadas)

Among the Banjaras, oral traditions are central to identity. Narrative songs like *Dhavallo* recount migration stories, heroic episodes, and sacred genealogies. Marriage songs, festival chants, and moral ballads underscore community ethics and spiritual beliefs. As Banjaras transition from nomadic to settled life, oral traditions have become critical tools of cultural continuity and pride.

Discussion

Identity reclamation through oral traditions is a dynamic, collective process. Tribes seek not only to preserve but also to reinterpret their stories. Revival efforts often blend tradition with innovation youth produce digital versions of folk songs; women reinterpret ritual chants; writers adapt myths into contemporary narratives.

Such revitalisation challenges the long history of silencing and marginalisation. Importantly, oral traditions provide emotional and psychological grounding. They reaffirm self-worth, strengthen community resilience, and challenge narratives that portray tribes as “backward.”

Conclusion

Reviving indigenous oral traditions is vital for cultural survival, identity reclamation, and historical justice. Oral traditions are the living soul of tribal communities. They encode ancestral wisdom, social values, ecological knowledge, and collective memory. Their revival empowers tribes to redefine themselves, assert cultural pride, and engage with the modern world on their own terms.

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