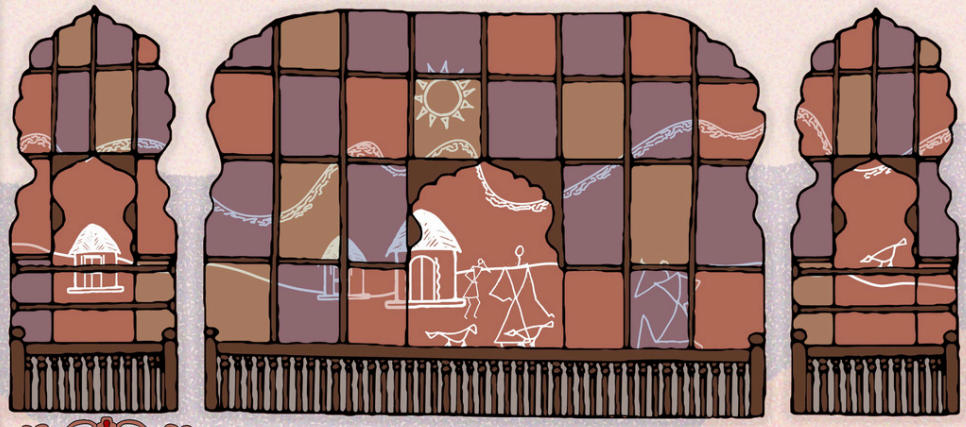
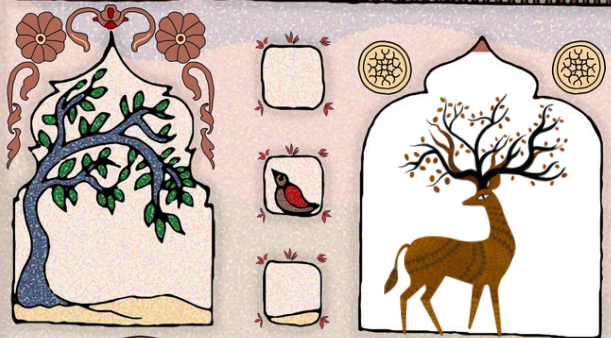
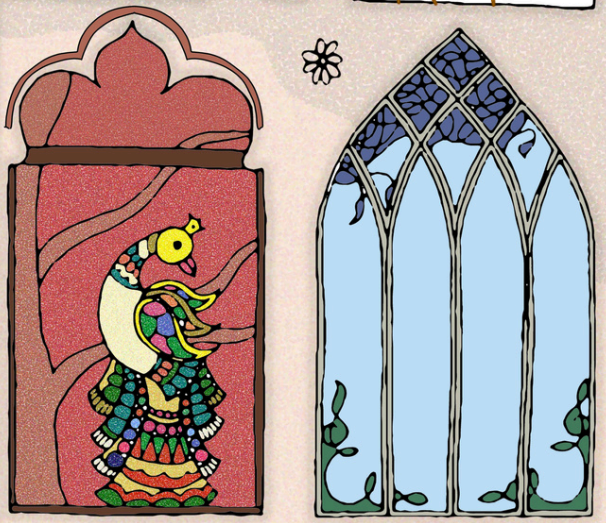


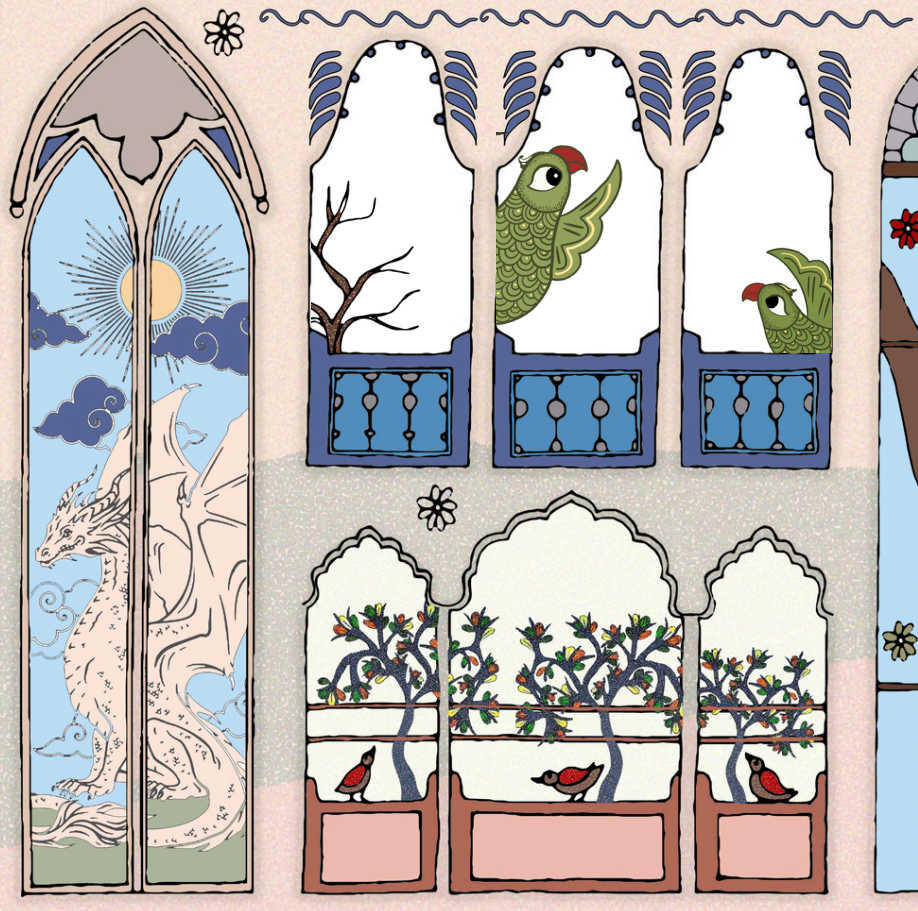
Centre for Contemporary Folklore



FOUNDATIONS OF FOLKLORE

A COMPENDIUM ON FOLKLORE AND ITS PRESERVATION





FOUNDATIONS OF FOLKLORE

A Compendium on Folklore and its Preservation

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INTRODUCTION

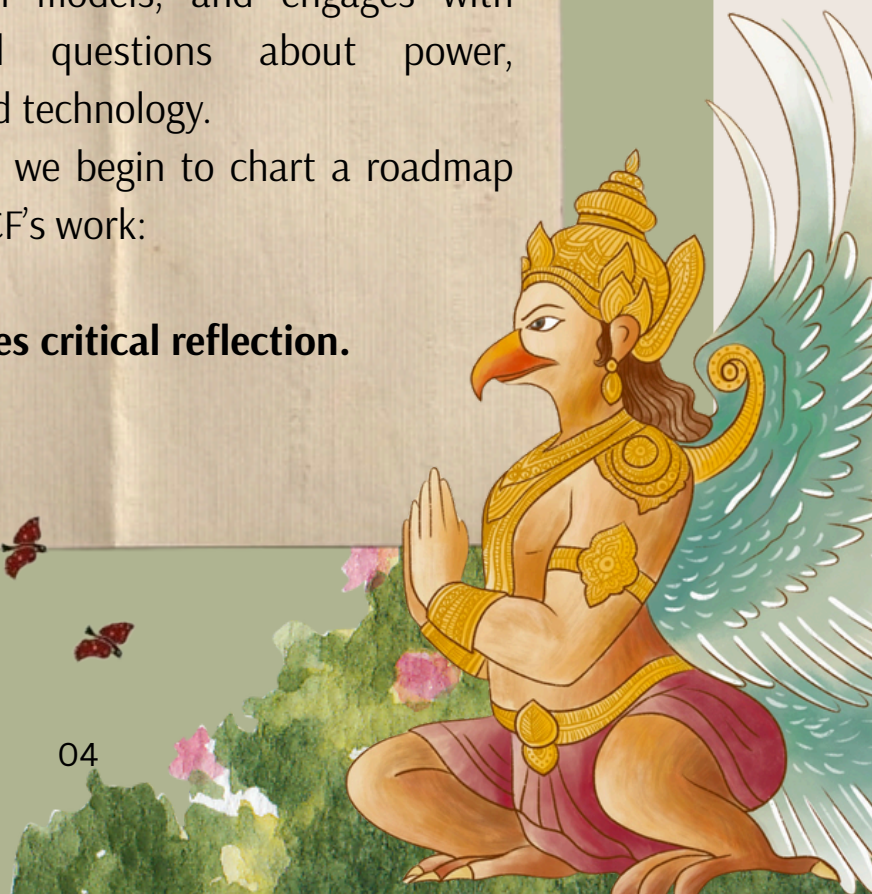
In an era of accelerating globalisation and digital disconnection, the intangible cultural heritage of communities, embodied in their songs, stories, rituals and idioms, is eroding at an alarming pace. Folklore, long dismissed as archaic, is increasingly recognised by academics and communities as a living archive of community memory.

This compendium aims to examine the historical understanding and preservation of folklore, the current models that exist, both globally and in India, and most importantly, the gaps that remain in the practice and theory of it. While scholars and institutions have contributed to documenting oral traditions and rituals, contemporary, urban, and marginalised folklore, particularly that of women, marginalised castes, and Adivasi communities, they still often remain under-represented or misinterpreted.

We position ourselves at the intersection of academia, fieldwork, creative story-telling and community engagement. Our aim is not just to collect or preserve stories, but to reimagine folklore preservation as a collaborative and evolving process, consciously ethical in its nature, that reflects the diversity of lived experiences today.

This compendium maps the historical evolution of folklore studies, examines international and local preservation models, and engages with emerging critical questions about power, representation and technology.
Through this text, we begin to chart a roadmap for prospective CCF's work:

One that **prioritises critical reflection.**



Genesis and Evolution of Folklore Studies

Folklore has been a subject of inquiry since the early modern period, with antiquarians like Henry Bourne, John Brand and Thomas Percy collecting customs, traditions, ballads, and legends alongside historical artefacts. Initially, these collections, often referred to as "popular antiquities," were more **about archiving curiosities** rather than analysing them (Lewis, 2012). This antiquarian interest laid the foundation for what would become a more scholarly pursuit by the late eighteenth century.

Development of Folklore as a Discipline

Folklore has been a subject of inquiry since the early modern period, with antiquarians like Henry Bourne, John Brand and Thomas Percy collecting customs, traditions, ballads, and legends alongside historical artefacts. Initially, these collections, often referred to as "popular antiquities," were more about archiving curiosities rather than analysing them (Lewis, 2012). This antiquarian interest laid the foundation for what would become a more scholarly pursuit by the late eighteenth century.

The discipline of folklorists began in the nineteenth century. In the late eighteenth century, Herder had used such terms as *Volkslied* (“folksong”), *Volksseele* (“folk soul”), and *Volksglaube* (“folk belief”). His famous anthology of folksongs, *Stimmen der Vilker in Liedern,* was first published in 1778-79, but folklorists proper, in the sense of the scholarly study of folklore, did not emerge until later. The Grimm brothers published the first volume of their celebrated *Kinder und Hausmärchen* in 1812 (Dundes, 1980).

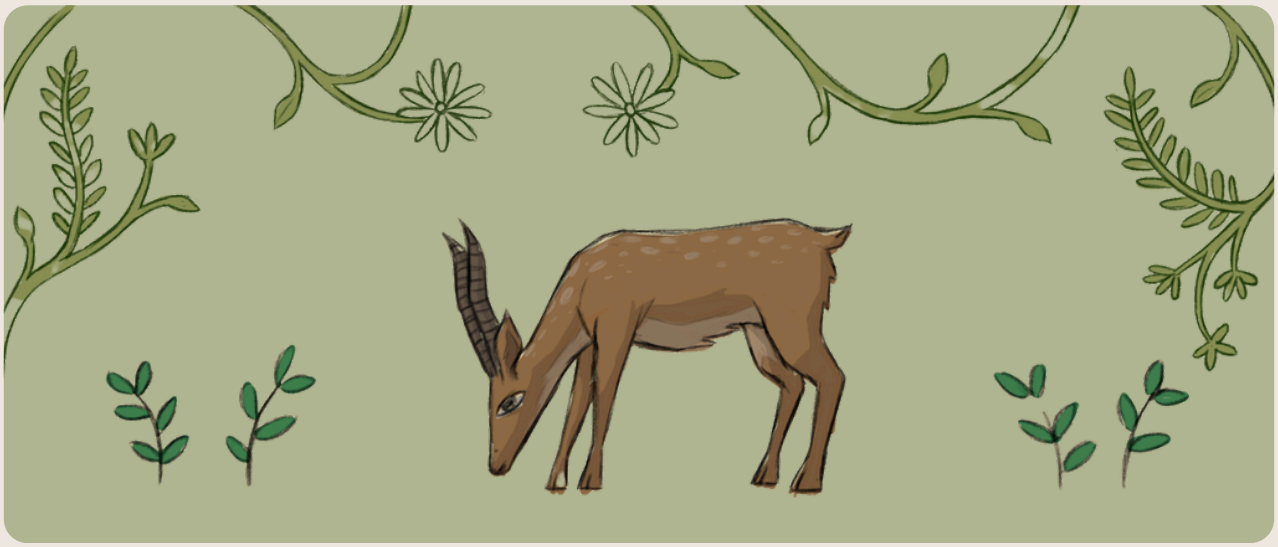
By the mid-nineteenth century, a significant shift occurred. The potential of folklore for systematic and scientific study became a focus. William John Thoms coined the term ‘folklore’ in 1846 to replace the older term ‘Popular Antiquities,’ aiming to elevate the study of British folklore to the level of German scholarship, as exemplified by the Grimm brothers. This new terminology and approach marked the formal beginning of folklore as an academic discipline. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, national folklore societies had been formed in Europe and the United States: among them, the Finnish Literature Society, 1831; the English Folk-Lore Society, 1878; and the American Folklore Society, 1888, all of which caused a shift in the study of folklore as a discipline. (Dundes, 1980).

Since the introduction of the term 'folklore' in the west, scholars across the world have put their heads together to offer a rational definition of the word. The controversy that emerged in satisfactorily defining the term was so intense that in the Standard Dictionary of Folklore, edited by Maria Leach, there are twenty-one definitions given by different scholars. **Jonas Balys defines Folklore as "comprising traditional creations of peoples, primitive and civilised, achieved by using sounds and words in metric form and prose, and includes also folk beliefs or superstitions, customs and performances, dances and plays". While Aureilio M. Espinosa defines folklore as "Folklore or popular knowledge is the accumulated store of what mankind has experienced or learned, and practised across the ages as popular and traditional knowledge, as distinguished from so-called scientific knowledge."** Scholars like William A. Wilson and Alan Dundes emphasise that while oral transmission is a key characteristic, not all orally transmitted content qualifies as folklore. Instead, folklore encompasses the creative expressions of a society, whether transmitted orally, in writing, or through other means such as visual tradition and performance (Dundes, 1965).

In India, the emergence of folklore as a distinct field of study was practised alongside colonial ethnographic documentation and nationalist cultural revivalism. British administrators and missionaries often compiled collections of folktales, songs, and tribal myths for anthropological or moral purposes.

For example, missionaries such as Rev. J. H. Knowles, during his stay in Kashmir in the late 1880s, compiled a collection of folklore from Jammu and Kashmir and published his book *Folk-Tales of Kashmir*. While, Indian intellectuals like Rabindranath Tagore, A. K. Ramanujan, and D. D. Kosambi approached folklore as a vital link to indigenous knowledge systems and alternative histories.

Kosambi (1965), for instance, analysed folklore through a materialist lens, focusing on its socio-economic and class underpinnings. The evolution of folklore in India also reflects shifting modes of transmission. Initially preserved through oral traditions, folklore adapted over time to written forms, performance traditions, visual representation, and, more recently, digital platforms. With each shift, the form and function of folklore transformed. For example, folktales that were once context-specific and localised have been compiled into canonical anthologies, sometimes losing their dialectal, performative, or improvisational qualities (Ramanujan, 1991). Meanwhile, performance-based traditions, whether *kathakalī, bhavai, terukkuttu,* or tribal dances, evolved alongside changing patronage systems and audience configurations. The transmission methods of folklore are diverse, including visual traditions, imitations, observations, and performances (von Sydow, 1948). Thus, defining folklore solely based on the medium of transmission is inadequate.

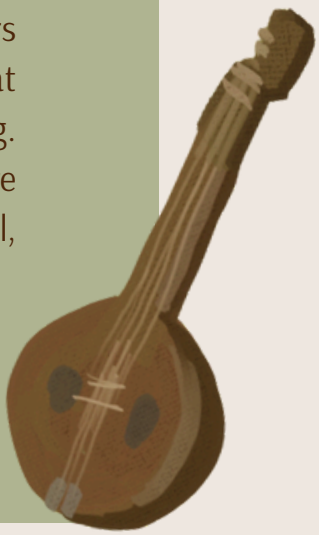


Folklore varies significantly across regions, reflecting each community's adaptation to its cultural environment. It serves as a narratological device in the modern scholarship of Indian culture and is seen as the collective product of a community's creative efforts, shared within a specific geographical area and cultural context. **This broad perspective includes verbal arts, folk beliefs, customs, and practices, as well as non-verbal elements like folk games, technology, and medicine (Lewis, 2012).**

Because folk was defined primarily in terms of its supposed relationship to the civilised or elite, folklore was presumed to exist only where a civilised or elite group existed.

Thus, large parts of the world, deemed uncivilised by ethnocentric European intellectuals, had no folk and hence no folklore.(Dundes, 1980).

This framing placed "folk" in a subordinate position, as something that could only be understood in opposition to dominant or refined cultures. As a result, entire cultures and communities that did not conform to European notions of civilisation were dismissed as lacking complexity or cultural value. Dundes thus critiques what he terms the **"devolutionary premise"**, the long-standing assumption that folklore is a degenerate or decayed form of high culture and that it inevitably disappears with modernisation. Instead, Dundes argues that folklore is not vanishing, but is constantly evolving. Far from being obsolete remnants of the past, folklore persists because it fulfils vital psychological, social, and cultural functions. (Dundes, 1969)



Dan Ben-Amos, in his *Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context* (1971) challenges formalistic definitions of folklore and argues for a **context-based approach.** He emphasizes performance, interaction, and communicative context, thus shifting the focus from fixed texts to living practice and social function.

Whileas *A. K. Ramanujan* in essays like *Three Hundred Ramayanas* and *Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?* explores the **plurality of folklore traditions** in India, emphasising how stories evolve across linguistic, regional, caste, and religious boundaries. He highlights the fluidity, performativity, and polyphonic character of Indian folklore. His work on oral and written traditions in Tamil and Kannada emphasises how folklore functions as **a site of resistance, negotiation, and cultural memory.**

Jawaharlal Handoo is widely regarded as a pioneer of Indian folkloristics and the founder of the Indian Folklore Congress. In *Folklore in Modern India* and other writings, Handoo examines how folklore survives in modern India by adapting to socio-political and technological changes. He argues that folklore **serves ideological, pedagogical, and therapeutic functions**, particularly in marginal communities. His work underscores the role of folklore in nation-building, collective identity formation, and contesting dominant discourses.

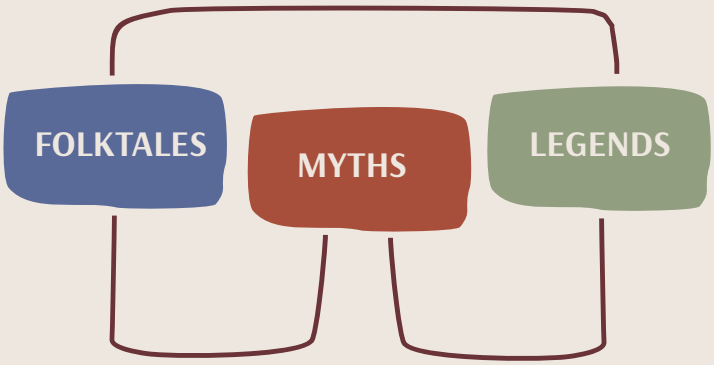
These perspectives align with the view that the genesis and evolution of folklore reflects broader transformations in landscapes such as the political, socio-economic, cultural and geographical. Far from being static, folklore continues to shape and be shaped by the communities that generate it.

Distinguishing Folklore from Other Narratives

William Bascom, in his paper: *The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives,* argues that clarifying basic terminology is crucial for the field of folklore study, as inconsistent definitions have "plagued" folklore, hindering agreement among folklorists and limiting understanding of prose narratives' "nature" and "role in human life". These distinctions allow folklorists to systematically study the varied "social settings," "purposes," "functions," and "rates of change" of narratives (Bascom, 1965).

Folktales are distinguished from other narrative forms primarily by the belief system associated with them, their setting in time and place, and their main purpose or function within a society. Bascom categorises "prose narratives" in three distinct categories: **Folktales, myths and legends.**

BASCOM CATEGORISES "PROSE NARRATIVES" IN THREE DISTINCT CATEGORIES:



Folktales are regarded as fiction by both the narrator and audience, not dogma or history (Bascom, 1965), and are not taken seriously as factual accounts, even though they may still have important functions beyond amusement, such as moral instruction. This contrasts sharply with myths, which are considered truthful accounts of events in the remote past, often involving non-human characters like deities or culture heroes, and are accepted on faith, serving to explain the origins of the world, mankind, or natural phenomena, and are frequently associated with theology and ritual (Bascom, 1965).

Legends, also regarded as true, are set in a less remote period where the world is much as it is today, typically feature human characters, and function as counterparts to written history, detailing migrations, wars, or deeds of past heroes (Bascom, 1965).

An individual element in folklore creation is also significant, which differentiates it from other creative narratives. Often, a specific individual's creative contribution becomes integrated into the broader cultural heritage through societal acceptance and generational transmission. This shows that for an item to be considered folklore, the anonymity of its creator is not a prerequisite; instead, its acceptance and perpetuation within a community are key (von Sydow, 1948).

Folktales are often characterised by conventional opening and closing formulas (e.g., **"Once upon a time..."**) which signal their fictional nature, and in many societies, there are taboos against telling them during the daytime, reserving them for after dark. While these distinctions are analytical concepts used by folklorists, many societies worldwide, such as the Trobriand Islanders, Ashanti, Yoruba, and Fon, make similar distinctions in their own "native categories" between factual (myths and legends) and fictional (folktales) narratives (Bascom, 1965). The distinction between these forms is crucial for understanding their role in human life. These distinctions, debated by folklorists for centuries from the Grimm Brothers to Frazer, show us that folktales belong to the realm of imagination and entertainment, rather than sacred belief or historical record.

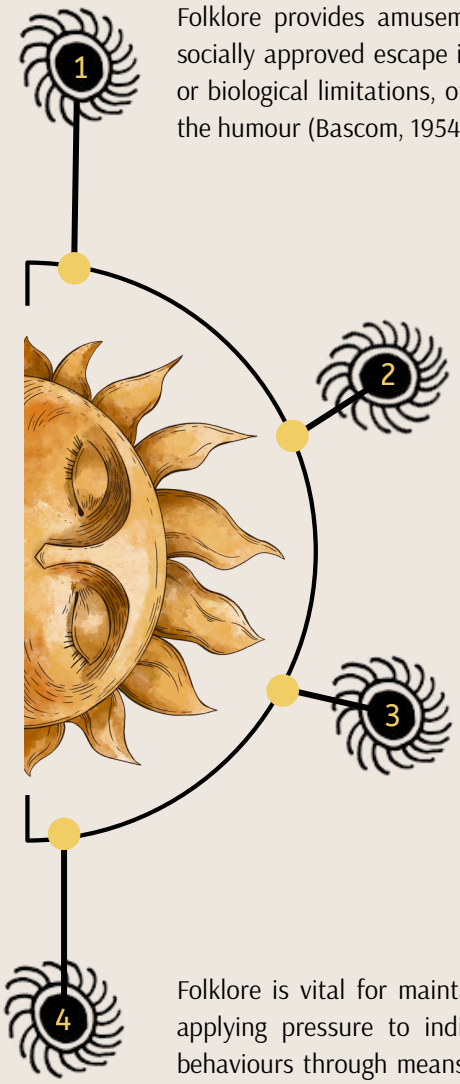
However, it is important to note that sometimes stories can blur these lines or even shift categories over time or through diffusion, for instance, a myth losing its belief and becoming a folktale in a new context or vice versa. Sandra K. D. Stahl, in *"The Personal Narrative as Folklore"*, argues for the inclusion of personal narratives within the academic study of folklore by challenging and expanding conventional definitions of "tradition" and "performance". She argues that the attempts to define *Marchen* or fairy tale turn out to be almost as unsatisfactory as those to make a strict definition of myth. The two forms continually flow into each other (Stahl, 1977), making it difficult to tell one from the other. Problematic definitions, such as Sir James Frazer's view of myths as "false science," can also create confusion and devalue the subject by implying it is "not true," thus impacting how it is approached in study. The study of European peasant life was initially termed as folklore, which American anthropologists called ethnography (Dundes, 1980). Hence, there was initially a restrictive separation between what was considered folklore by folklorists and which other cultures and societies' stories could be studied under anthropology and ethnography.

Richard M. Dorson, in his paper *Mythology and Folklore,* provides a comprehensive review of books published in these fields, primarily from the late 1960s to early 1970s, aiming to shed light on the theoretical and research trends. Dorson argues that there is a significant academic divergence, noting that while the terms are often linked, the study of mythology and folklore has "steadily grown apart" (Dorson, 1973). Moreover, Dorson critiques the literary bias of mythological studies, which tend to treat myths as "fixed texts" worthy of literary admiration or psychoanalytic decoding (e.g., in the works of Jung or Campbell), whereas folklore values the variability, communal authorship, and vernacular creativity that characterise folk tales, legends, and superstitions. He warns that **conflating the two disciplines risks erasing the cultural specificity and social embeddedness of folklore narratives.**

Need for Folklore

Bascom, in his paper *Four Functions of Folklore* identifies four primary functions of folklore, which he collectively views as crucial for maintaining cultural stability and using it as a marker to specify its study.

FOUR FUNCTIONS OF FOLKLORE (BASCOM, 1954)



1. Folklore provides amusement, offering entertainment and a socially approved escape in fantasy from societal repressions or biological limitations, often with deeper meanings beneath the humour (Bascom, 1954).

2. It functions to validate culture by justifying rituals, institutions, and beliefs, acting as a "warrant, a charter, and often even a practical guide" for various cultural practices and strengthening tradition by tracing it to a "supernatural reality of initial events" (Bascom, 1954).

3. Folklore serves an educational role, particularly in non-literate societies, where forms like ogre tales, fables, riddles, and proverbs are used to discipline children, inculcate morals, sharpen wits, and transmit traditional knowledge and attitudes across generations (Bascom, 1954).

4. Folklore is vital for maintaining conformity and social control, applying pressure to individuals who deviate from accepted behaviours through means such as songs of allusion, proverbs, or tales that express disapproval or ridicule, while also offering social approval for those who conform (Bascom, 1954).

Thus, folklore serves critical functions, particularly in entertainment. Its entertainment value has historically facilitated the acceptance and dissemination of underlying cultural and philosophical messages. These functions, in turn, have made folklore an integral part of societal development, occasionally extending to economic roles (Leach, 1949).

These characteristics associated with folklore can help us distinguish folklore from other narratives and fictions, particularly myths and legends, streamlining the study of folklore and the preservation of folklore. Recognising these distinctions not only sharpens the theoretical boundaries of folklore studies, as argued by scholars like Dan Ben-Amos, but also strengthens efforts in the documentation and preservation of folklore in both academic and community settings.

The Need for Folklore Preservation

Folklore holds a unique and symbiotic relationship with society, simultaneously influencing and being influenced by social changes. This interrelationship renders folklore a dynamic entity, continuously evolving alongside society (Lewis, 2012). Experts argue that since folklore originates from societal contexts, societal influences on folklore are more substantial than vice versa, making folklore highly adaptive to social transformations (Dundes, 1965).

In contemporary times, digital media, television, and the internet have marginalised traditional folklore, often reducing its presence to commercial adaptations like the Disney movies. **This shift raises questions about the relevance of preserving folklore when scientific advancements now provide explanations for many aspects of life that folklore once addressed.** However, there are compelling reasons to maintain and preserve these cultural narratives.

Preserving myths, folktales, legends, and fairy tales is crucial for understanding both our history and our present. These stories provide insights into the thoughts, behaviours, and everyday lives of our ancestors, showcasing the continuity of human emotions and experiences across time. Despite advancements in science and technology, the core human conditions of love, jealousy, and self-discovery remain unchanged, making historical folklore relevant today (Estes, 1992).

Folklore connects individuals to the collective cultural energy and deeper essence of humanity. These narratives speak to the heart, fostering a sense of common ground and shared humanity, which is increasingly vital in times of global challenges like climate change and political unrest. Folklore stories activate a primal part of us, offering a counterbalance to the rational, data-driven world we inhabit, and encouraging curiosity and introspection (Estes, 1992).

The art of storytelling, as noted by Walter Benjamin in 1936, is diminishing due to the rapid societal changes and information overload. This decline undermines an essential human need for community. Historically, storytelling created a sense of belonging and communal identity, essential for healthy social structures. By preserving and retelling old myths and stories, we honour our ancestors, foster self-discovery, and build unified communities (Benjamin, 1936).

Folklore risks being frozen in museums or archives, rather than continuing as a vital, adaptive part of everyday life, but at the same time, folklore does survive on its own through a balance between tradition (conservatism) and adaptation (dynamism), making it culturally relevant across generations. This interplay allows folklore to maintain continuity with the past while also responding to present needs and circumstances. As Barre Toelken notes in *The Dynamics of Folklore* (1979), it is precisely this tension between preserving established forms and embracing change that enables folklore to remain a living, evolving part of everyday life.

Therefore, folklore preservation is essential for cultural continuity, personal and communal identity, and maintaining the rich heritage of human creativity. These narratives provide valuable insights and connect us to our deeper selves, ensuring that the wisdom and values of past generations continue to enrich contemporary society. When one examines the concept of folklore from the above perspective, it appears that it serves **two important functions:**

Entertainment

Social education

The entertainment value certainly made the folklore, as well as its underlying message for human society and philosophy of life, readily acceptable to the people. The functional aspect of social education made folklore an integral part of the development process of society. This, in some cases, allows folklore to perform economic functions.

Barriers to the Preservation of Folklore

Despite widespread recognition of folklore's value, its preservation remains obstructed by structural, legal, technological and social barriers. Institutions often operate through centralised models that prioritise nationalistic or sanitised narratives, leaving local, subaltern voices excluded. **Legal barriers in folk preservation, like a lack of suitable provisions of protection and documentation, can often lead to cultural erasure.** The right to protection of indigenous knowledge is a very fluid topic because of its nature and ability in the international intellectual property regime (Carpenter, 2004).

Technological barriers like the digital divide and the lack of multilingual tools prevent communities from documenting their traditions. Socially, caste, gender, and class hierarchies deeply affect whose stories are preserved and how. Folk traditions considered indecent or 'unworthy' by dominant norms, such as bawdy songs, Dalit myths, or tribal lore, are often neglected or even actively erased. Together, these obstacles demand an urgent approach to preservation, one that CCF hopes to model through community-led and technologically-empowered practices.

Some of these persistent barriers to folk preservation in contemporary times are:

A. LEGAL BARRIERS

Existing intellectual property laws, such as the Copyright Act of 1957, the Geographical Indications of Goods Act of 1999, and the Biological Diversity Act of 2002, are insufficient to address the unique characteristics of folklore in India, including its oral transmission, communal ownership, and continuous evolution (Sony, 2025). **The Copyright Act focuses on individual authorship, which conflicts with the collective authorship inherent in folklore.**

Similarly, while the Biological Diversity Act mandates benefit-sharing, its implementation has been inadequate, particularly in relation to intangible heritage like songs, stories, and rituals. Concerns regarding access to biological resources are yet to be addressed. **However, recent global conferences have highlighted the lack of indigenous presence in real positions of negotiation and dialogue.** The response has begun from the Indigenous Caucus in global forums, most recently organising an Indigenous-led conference focusing on a rights-based approach to address Indigenous access to their ancestral resources, both tangible and intangible.

Furthermore, the Patent Act of 1970 fails to consider the holistic integration and indigenous contexts of knowledge systems, leaving undocumented traditional practices unprotected. These gaps show an urgent need for a tailored legal framework to preserve and protect India's rich folkloric legacy.

The term "authenticity" implies that an item is **original, and evokes genuineness** from its practitioners and witnesses, and is isolated from modern forces like mass-produced copies and technological advances. But if we examine folklore, there is a lack of authenticity or originality, which you might find in other works. The Copyright Act, 1957, is the primary legislation in India governing copyright law. It protects original literary, dramatic, musical, and artistic works, as well as cinematograph films and sound recordings. The act grants creators certain exclusive rights over their works, such as the right to reproduce, distribute, and adapt them.

But there is a limitation in the Copyright Act, 1957, regarding the protection of folklore. Section 13(1)(a) of the Act defines the term “original” about literary, dramatic, musical and artistic works and, by doing so, extends protection to pre-existing expressions of folklore. However, the Act largely focuses on safeguarding original works, and many traditional folk productions do not meet this standard of originality (Sony, 2025).

The statute itself does not clearly define what constitutes ‘originality,’ but judicial interpretations suggest that originality in copyright relates to the expression of creative thought, rather than the thought itself (Sony, 2025).

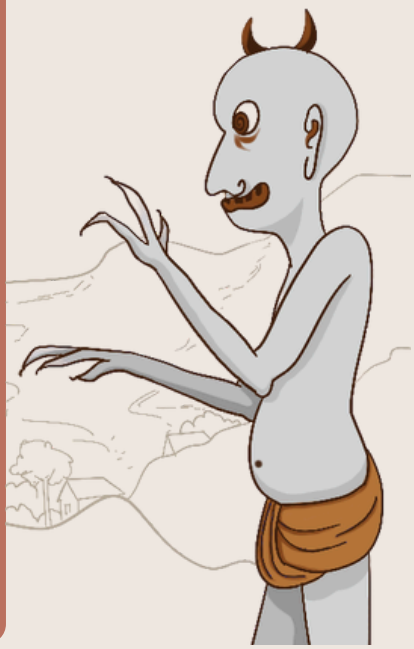
The requirement of “original composition” means that a work must not be copied from another and must be born out of the author’s intellect. This standard sits uneasily with folklore, as folkloric works are almost always drawn from pre-existing traditions, they are fundamentally rooted in shared ideas, beliefs, customs, and themes passed down through generations. Proving or establishing “originality” in copyright is thus far more complex than testing novelty in patent law. Courts generally consider two key factors: first, that the work must originate from an author’s intellect and not simply be copied; second, that the author must have exercised some degree of “skill, judgment, or labour” in compiling the work.

In the context of folklore, this creates a tension, under copyright, the expression of culture does not always align neatly with the traditional, collective forms of originality found in folk traditions.

On October 8-10, 2024 the Indigenous People Global Coordinating Committee in collaboration with Securing Indigenous Peoples Rights to a Green Economy (SIRGE) Coalition organised The Just Transition: Indigenous Peoples’ Perspectives, Knowledge and Lived Experiences Summit in Geneva, Switzerland. This forum is unique in being the first Indigenous led gathering on discussions of Green Economy. Indigenous delegations from all seven socio-cultural regions (Africa, the Arctic, Asia, Central and South America and the Caribbean, Eastern Europe/Russian Federation/Central Asia/Transcaucasia, North America, and the Pacific) attended the summit, set agendas and had direct engagements with global stakeholders.

The summit saw the compilation of an agreement defining *'Indigenous Peoples Principles for a Just Transition'* by over 100 representatives of indigenous communities who attended the said summit (IWGIA, 2025). Of importance here is the 5th point- 'Respect for Indigenous Peoples' Ways of Life' which emphasises the significance of guaranteeing to the indigenous communities of the world, safeguards and protection of Indigenous intellectual property rights.

In detail the report notes- "For safeguards and protection, a mechanism must be established to promote, protect, and preserve Indigenous Peoples' knowledge, and initiate a process to establish an institution for the documentation of Indigenous Peoples' knowledge of food systems, ethno-medicine and ethno-plants"(IWGIA, 2025).



Point 9 titled 'Recognition of Indigenous Peoples' Roles and Responsibilities' addresses the lacunae in the access to biological resources in the process of transition to a green economy. The report makes the following point **"A just transition must be based on recognition of our role and responsibility as caretakers, stewards, and guardians of our traditional lands, rangelands, forests, deserts, savannas, waters, air, ice, territories, and resources, our Indigenous laws and protocols, and the spiritual, cultural, historic and ongoing relationships we have with the plants, animals, elements, lands, ice, and waters that give us life and identity" (IWGIA, 2025).** This point emphasises the importance of just transition of projects to recognise and respect indigenous peoples' connection to their biological resources. To defer from causing harm to indigenous peoples ecosystems and sacred sites by conducting in depth impact analysis and ensuring transparency in funding, potential beneficiaries and expected financial returns on undertaking such green climate projects (IWGIA, 2025).

B. THREAT OF CULTURAL HOMOGENISATION

Concurrently, Boro (2006) warns of the risks of cultural erosion if globalisation proceeds unchecked. **Uniform global cultural logics may lead to the commodification, dilution, or misappropriation of tribal identity markers. The author emphasises the uneven power dynamics, external agents (traders, investors, intermediaries) may extract cultural goods without equitable benefit to originating communities.** As such, Boro calls for institutional safeguards, such as government-mediated monitoring or regulation, to ensure community control and benefit sharing from any commercialisation of folk heritage. Unauthorised use of tribal designs in fashion, adaptations of folk music in movies without proper acknowledgement, and the commercialisation of rituals and dances for tourism purposes are prevalent examples of such misuse (Sony, 2025).

C. LANGUAGE EROSION

Folklore in India has been deeply shaped by colonial ethnography, where British administrators collected tribal and village tales (e.g., William Crooke, Verrier Elwin), often framing them through orientalist or 'civilising' lenses. This problem was also found in archiving Kashmiri folklore, since a lot of the documentation of folktales initially was done by western academics or missionaries, resulting in some meaning being lost in translation (from Kashmiri to English), an example of which is: *Folktales of Kashmir* by Rev. J. Hinton Kowles, which resulted in cultural appropriation & exploitation. Jawaharlal Handoo also wrote of this exploitation as –"folklore began to be studied from the Indian point of view. Collectors and analysts began identifying themselves with the native lore and the cultural context", the 'collectors' in question being the foreigners in India.

People stopped reading the tales in their original languages, which resulted in a lack of conceptualisation in original landscapes, a loss of underlying meaning and cultural understanding in which these tales were based.

As younger generations shift to dominant languages (e.g., Hindi or English), the linguistic vessels of folklore disappear. Even though these translated folklores get documented, the "originality" aspect gets lost in the process and leads to the erasure of the original folklore.

D. DECLINE IN TRADITIONAL TRANSMISSION

Modern lifestyles, migration to urban areas, and changing family structures have reduced intergenerational storytelling and communal gatherings, weakening the traditional ways folklore is passed down. This weakening of transmission makes folklore more vulnerable to distortion and exploitation, as its custodianship becomes fragmented.

Urban migration and generational disconnect are leading to the erosion of India's rich folkloric traditions and indigenous knowledge. As young individuals move to cities for education and employment opportunities, they often grow distant from their cultural roots, resulting in the neglect and gradual disappearance of traditional practices. The intergenerational transmission, crucial for the preservation of folklore, is being disrupted, causing rituals, songs, and oral epics to lose their significance in modern life. Tribal dialects and languages, which are vital carriers of folklore and identity, are vanishing at an alarming rate. This cultural disintegration not only undermines community heritage but also erodes the diversity and depth of India's collective cultural legacy
Addressing this disconnect requires innovative strategies to foster cultural pride and engagement among younger generations, even amidst urbanisation (Nabi, 2025).

E. TECHNOLOGICAL BARRIERS

A contemporary and persistent barrier that haunts today's preservation efforts is that many communities lack access to basic recording tools, resources or internet connectivity for archiving their traditions. **Without affordable audio-visual equipment, smartphones, or stable digital infrastructure, the documentation of songs, stories, rituals, and oral histories becomes sporadic or entirely absent. This technological gap not only hinders local communities from recording their heritage but also means they remain dependent on external researchers or institutions, which can lead to selective or extractive preservation practices.** The absence of digital literacy and online platforms in many rural or marginalised regions further isolates these traditions from global archives and cultural databases, creating an unequal system where certain voices and practices are far more likely to be saved and shared than others.

DIFFERENT MODELS OF FOLKLORE PRESERVATION

A. INDIAN MODELS

(1) GOVERNMENT-LED INITIATIVES

Scholars such as K. S. Singh and M. D. Muthukumaraswamy have documented government-led initiatives for folklore preservation in India. Singh, in his work "Folklore and Oral History in South India," discusses how governmental bodies, such as the Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, have played pivotal roles in documenting and promoting diverse forms of folklore, including oral narratives, music, dance, and rituals. Muthukumaraswamy's research on the National Folklore Support Centre further explores how state-sponsored institutions have collaborated with grassroots organisations and local communities to safeguard and revitalise endangered folk traditions across India.

The Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages has also been at the forefront of documenting the literature, art, and heritage of Jammu and Kashmir. In collaboration with academics like Gulam Nabi Atash, the organisation has documented the oral traditions and community folklore of the region and created an archive that now contains hundreds, if not thousands, of stories and culturally important folk tales of Kashmir or *Luke Kathe*.

The National Folklore Support Centre (NFSC), Chennai India's pioneering institution for folklore research, archiving, and community-based documentation, publishes research journals, conducts fieldwork, and runs community programs and has a strong emphasis on tribal and regional folklore preservation.

Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi, is another government-funded apex body for research in arts, culture, oral traditions, and folklore. It maintains audio-visual archives, conducts folklore digitisation projects, and promotes inter-disciplinary research.

The Sahitya Akademi (Indian Literature Archive) is also a government-led initiative towards preservation efforts. **India's National Academy of Letters** has specific divisions focusing on folk literature, tribal oral narratives, and regional languages. This organisation publishes anthologies and sponsors folk arts conferences as well.

The Government of India is also involved in the preservation of folk cultures across India. An example is available in the Press Bureau Of India release on the occasion of Tribal Day, 2025. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs supports a total of 29 Tribal Research Institutes tasked with documenting tribal languages, traditional practices, and folk arts (Press Information Bureau, 2025). The development of educational materials for tribal students also falls within its purview.

(2) COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACHES

Studies by Molly Kaushal and P. K. Mishra highlight the significance of community-based approaches to folklore preservation. **Kaushal's ethnographic research in Rajasthan, as documented in *Traditional Festivals: A Multicultural Perspective*, underscores how local communities actively engage in the preservation and transmission of folk traditions through rituals, festivals, and oral performances.** Mishra's work on the role of folklore in tribal communities in Central India elucidates how indigenous groups employ community-based strategies, such as participatory documentation and intergenerational knowledge transmission, to safeguard their cultural heritage from external threats and internal transformations.

(3) ACADEMIC RESEARCH AND DOCUMENTATION

The contributions of academic institutions and scholars to folklore preservation are examined by R. Siva Kumar and Brenda Beck. **Kumar's research on the role of universities in documenting and disseminating folk art forms, as discussed in *Folklore in Indian Art: The Traditional Arts,* underscores how academic research centres serve as repositories of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices.** Beck's study of oral traditions among the Warlis of Western India, as outlined in *'Symbolic Heat: Gender, Health, and Worship among the Tamils of South India and Sri Lanka,'* highlights the collaborative efforts between anthropologists, linguists, and local informants in recording and analysing oral narratives as a means of preserving intangible cultural heritage.

Notable early contributors include:

- **Colonel Tod** extensively documented the mythology, traditions, customs, rites, rituals, beliefs, and practices of the Rajputs in his book *The Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, providing a wealth of folklore information.
- **Dr. L.P. Tessitory,** an Italian scholar, collected songs, tales, and traditions from Rajputana, publishing articles in *Indian Antiquary* and rescuing bardic poems.
- In the Punjab, missionaries and civilians like **Mr. C. Swynnerton** (*The Romantic Tales from the Punjab*), **Sir R.C. Temple** (*Legends of the Punjab*), **C.F. Usborne** (*Punjabi Lyrics and Proverbs*), and **F.A. Steel** (*The Tales of the Punjab*) brought folk tales and ballads to light.
- **Sir Aurel Stein**, a historian, published folk stories of Kashmir taken from professional storytellers in *Hatim's Tales*.

- **Sir George Grierson**, a renowned linguist and Superintendent of the Linguistic Survey of India, published Hindi folksongs and ballads in academic journals and edited Bhojpuri and Behari folksongs. He also investigated the historicity of figures like Gopichand and Alha. His book *Behar Peasant Life* is a significant resource for Behari folklore.

- **William Crooke**, an English civilian, authored *An Introduction To The Popular Religion And Folklore Of Northern India,* which meticulously described the rites, customs, and religious beliefs of the common folk in Northern India.

- Sheriff translated Hindi folk songs into English verse. These early studies, however, sometimes approached folklore as "cultural curios to be preserved" and were influenced by a colonial paradigm that viewed non-European societies as "primitive" and "less civilized," often from a diachronic and past-oriented perspective.

- **Stuart H Blackburn**, an ethnographer, is the author of the popular book of folk tales titled '*Moral Fictions: Tamil Folktales in Oral Traditions.*' The book divides a collection of 100 tales into 7 sections, highlighting tales obtained from 41 story tellers. The book is especially highlighted for its final eighth section, where Blackburn places Tamil folkloric culture within the larger international scholarship on folklore.

- Another Book by Stuart H Blackburn published by the University of Pennsylvania Press in 1988, is titled *Singing of Birth and Death: Texts in Performance,* an exposition of the Vil Pattu (Tamilian Bow Songs) as an oral tradition. The book contains translations of 3 Bow songs, followed by an exploration of the compositional, ritualistic and socio-political components surrounding these performances. His theoretical analysis leads him to distinguish between two types of *Bow Songs- Birth songs and Death songs.* Blackburn identifies a 3 part structure these performances undertake- beginning with a Birth song, a death song occupying the middle slot and an end which narrates an auspicious event. This work played a significant role in showcasing the diversity and regional variances in Hindu tradition, challenging the Brahmanical orientation that most Western literature adopted at the time.

With the emergence of Academic Discipline and Institutional Support, Folklore studies began to emerge as an academic discipline around 1946, influenced by Herskovits' presidential address at the American Folklore Society and Redfield's concept of Great Tradition - Little Tradition in 1953.

In India, anthropological approaches and methods of analysis, particularly those led by Lévi-Strauss (1969) and later Dundes (1975) and Propp (1984), brought about significant changes in the questions addressed through folklore studies.

Key developments in academic preservation include

- The University Grants Commission set up a committee in 1982 to recommend the promotion of folklore studies in Indian Universities. This report recognised the unique importance of folklore for Indian societies, noting that, unlike in some Western countries where it had become a relic, in India, folklore is both living and a growing part of the culture.

- The National Folklore Support Centre (NFSC) established in Chennai has been instrumental in publishing specialised periodicals and books, bringing out important titles such as *Khasi Jaintia folklore: context, discourse and history (2004)* by Prof. Soumen Sen, and Folklore, public sphere and civil society (2004), jointly published with the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA).

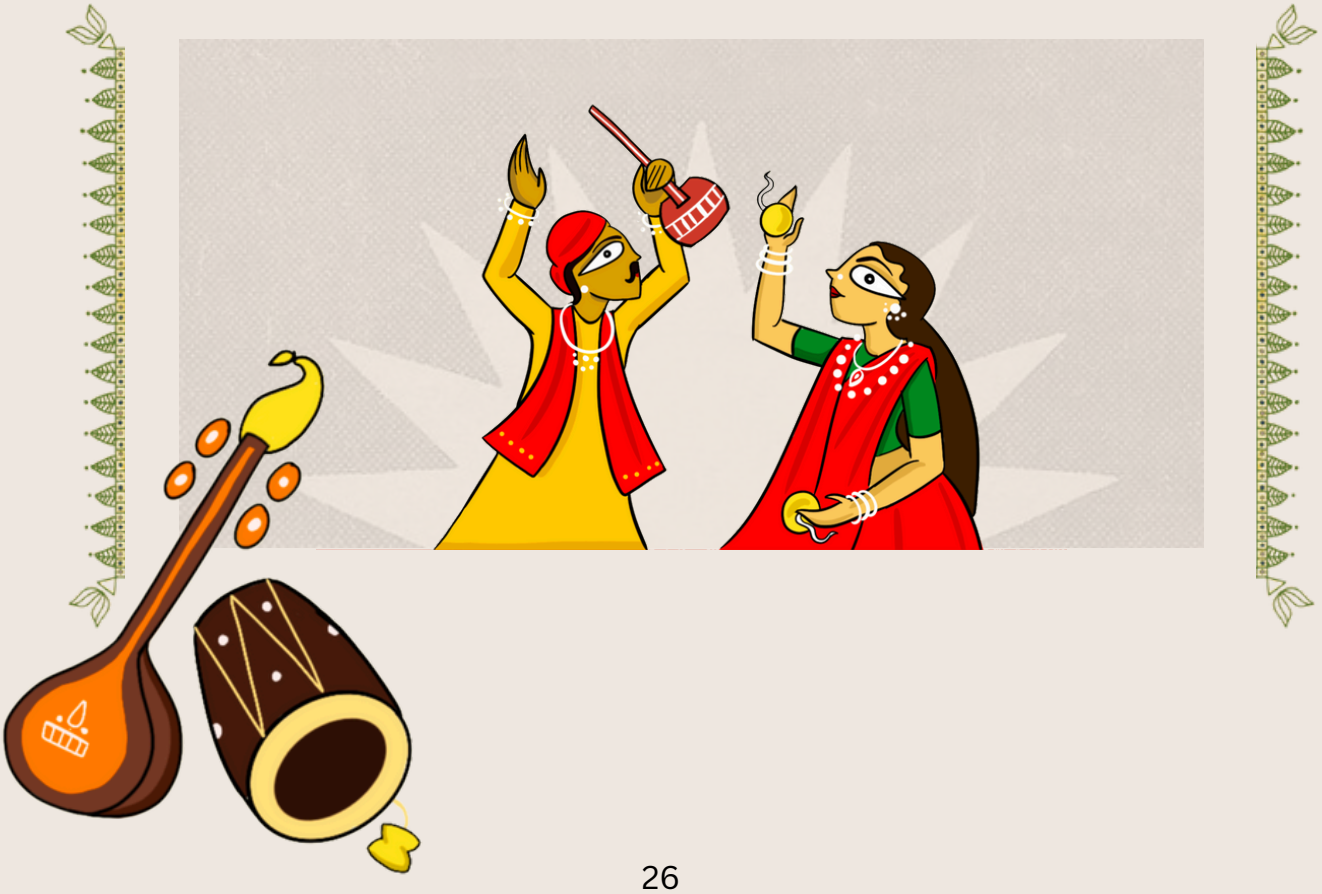
- The UNESCO website for Intangible Cultural Heritage also shows the need to save unrecorded knowledge.

(A) Regional and Individual Academic Efforts Across various Indian states

- **Rajasthan**: The Shardul Rajasthani Research Institute, established in 1946, collects, preserves, and publishes the folk literature of the region, issuing the quarterly *Rajasthan Bharati*.

- **Uttar Pradesh**: **The Braj Sahitya Mandal, founded in 1940**, works to revitalise the Braj dialect and preserve its folk literature, collecting folk-songs, ballads, sayings, tales, proverbs, idioms, music, and art. It was later transformed into the Braj Kala Kendra in 1960. Dr. Satyendra's thesis, *Studies in Braj Folk Literature*, is the first study of this area, and the Mandal publishes *Braj Bharati*. The Hindi Janpadiya Parishad was formed to coordinate folklore activities across Hindi dialects and publishes *Janapada*. The Hindi Sahitya Sammelan of Allahabad, established in 1910, has encouraged the study of Indian folklore by publishing collections of Maithali, Bhojpuri, and Rajasthani folk-songs. The Ethnographic and Folk-culture Society, founded by Dr. D.N. Majumdar at the University of Lucknow, publishes *Eastern Anthropologist* and collections of Indian folk-songs, such as *Snowballs of Garhwal and Folk-songs of Chhattisgarh*. Individual scholars like Dr. Vasudeva Saran Agrawal and Pt. Banarasi Das Chaturvedi has inspired a folklore collection. Pt. Ganesh Chaube and Shri Durga Shanker Prasad Singh have done valuable work in Bhojpuri folk literature, with Shri Singh earning a Ph.D. for his thesis, *Studies in Bhojpuri folk literature*. The universities of Allahabad and Lucknow have recognised folklore as a subject for their highest examinations.

- **Bengal**: Under Dr. Sir Ashutosh Mookerji's initiative, the University of Calcutta undertook extensive efforts to publish Bengal's oral literature. Dr. D.C. Sen led the collection of vast numbers of folk songs and stories, notably *Mymansingh Gitika* and its English translation, *Eastern Bengal Ballads*. Dr. Sen also authored The Folk-Literature of Bengal, a comparative study. Other publications include *Haramani, Thakur Dadar Jhuli, The Folk tales of Bengal* by Lal Behari De, and various versions of the ballads of Gopichand and Manikchand. The Asiatic Folk-Literature Society was established in Calcutta by Shri Gopi Nath Sen to collect and preserve Asian folk literature.



- **Bihar**: The Rashtra Bhasa Parishad (Academy of National Language), established by the Bihar government, develops Hindi and preserves its folklore. The Bhojpuri Samiti of Arrah works for Bhojpuri folk culture revival, publishing the monthly magazine *Bhojpuri*. W.G. Archer recorded folk songs, stories, and proverbs of primitive tribes like Munda and Oraon in books like *Blue Grove and Bhojpuri Gramya Git*. Shri Ram Iqbal Singh 'Rakesh' published *Mathili Lok Git*.

- **Gujarat and Kathiawad**: Mr. Kincaid documented the heroic deeds of outlaws in *The Outlaws of Kathiawad*. Shri Jhaber Chand Meghani dedicated his life to studying and publishing the folklore of Gujarat and Kathiawad, including folk songs- *Radhiyali Rata, Halaradan* and historical tales- *Sorath Nu Tire Tire, Saurastra Ni Rasdhar, Sorath Ni Bahar Batiya*. He also provided critical studies of folk literature. Other scholars like Narmada Shanker Mehta and Gokul Das Raichura, along with institutions like the Vernacular Society of Gujarat and the Gujarati Sahitya Sammelan, have contributed to preserving oral literature. K.M. Jhaveri provided an account of folklore activities in Gujarat and Kathiawad in *Milestones in Gujarati Literature.*

- **Maharashtra**: Scholars like Shri A.N. Bhagwat, D.N. Bhagwat, and Mary Fuller have collected folk songs, particularly "grind-mill" and "grinding songs".

- **Andhra Pradesh and Telangana**: E.J. Robinson (*Tales and Poems of South India*) and Mr. Gover (*The Folk Songs of South India*) made early collections. Notable figures from the state include Biruduraju Rama Raju, known for his extensive work on Telugu folklore and his contributions to the journal *Janapada Vignana*. Illindala Saraswati Devi was a prominent novelist and short story writer who also explored folklore themes in her works.

- **Madhya Pradesh**: Dr. S.C. Dube collected folk songs of the Chhattisgarh peasantry (*Field Songs of Chhattisgarh*) and wrote a monograph on the Kamars tribe. Dr. Verrier Elwin, a prominent anthropologist and folklorist, has worked extensively among the Gonds, publishing monographs on their ethnology and folklore, including *Folk Songs of Chhattisgarh, Songs of the Forest, Folk Tales of Maha Kosal,* and *Folk-songs of Maikal Hills.*

- **Andaman and Nicobar**: Anjali Moitra's work, including *Islands in Flux: The Andaman and Nicobar Story,* provides valuable insights into the history, culture, and environment of the Andaman Islands.

- **Tripura**: Dr. Jagadis Gan-Choudhury authored the book *Folk-Tales of Tripura,* a collection of 132 folk tales from North-Eastern India.

- **Nagaland**: Scholars like Prof. Temsula Ao, an eminent anthropologist, author, and recipient of the Padma Shri and Sahitya Akademi Award, are known for their work on Naga oral and literary traditions. Her writings, including short stories and poetry, are significantly influenced by Naga folklore. Other scholars, such as Dr. Anungla Aier is a renowned anthropologist, have presented research on the origins of Naga customary practices, art, crafts, myths, and legends.

B. INTERNATIONAL MODELS

Traditional societies often viewed folklore as a common heritage of the community rather than as individual property, resulting in the absence of formal or informal laws in many developing countries that would grant ownership rights of folklore to any community or group of individuals. This communal approach to heritage inherently opposed the concept of private property rights, whether collective or individual, over such heritage. Consequently, folklore has been commercially exploited by individuals outside the community, even within the same nation.

The strong sentiments among developing countries regarding the need for a legal framework to protect folklore found expression through legislative measures, particularly in many African nations. The Bangui Agreement (March 2, 1977), which established the African Intellectual Property Organisation (OAPI), is a prime example. This international treaty reflected the collective mindset of several African nations concerning the legal protection of folklore. These legal provisions unequivocally declared folklore as part of a nation's cultural heritage, focusing on protecting community creations rather than individual authors, thus deviating from traditional copyright laws.

The Stockholm Diplomatic Conference of 1967 for revising the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works (the "Berne Convention") acknowledged, to a limited extent, the aspirations of developing countries for protecting folklore. Article 15(4) of the Berne Convention introduced provisions that allowed national legislation to designate a competent authority to represent the author in cases of unpublished works where the author is unknown but presumed to be a national of the country. This provision indicated that traditional copyright law might not be the most suitable framework for preserving community-owned cultural heritage expressed through folklore. The principle of originality, the limited protection term, and the focus on concepts like 'author' and 'work' make copyright laws inadequate for protecting the wealth of knowledge and tradition passed down through generations and collectively owned by the community.

Efforts to address the need for protecting folklore have also included provisions under neighbouring or related rights laws. For instance, the International Convention for the Protection of Performers, the Producers of Phonograms, and Broadcasting Organisations (1961) (the "Rome Convention") provides indirect protection for performances of expressions of folklore. Developing countries have been encouraged to adhere to the Rome Convention and the Geneva Convention for the Protection of Producers of Phonograms Against Unauthorised Duplication of their Phonograms (1971) to safeguard folklore performances and broadcasts. However, the definition of "performers" under the Rome Convention, which includes actors, singers, musicians, dancers, and others performing literary or artistic works, does not extend to performers of folklore, as folklore does not correspond to the concept of literary and artistic works.

The inadequacy of existing copyright and neighbouring rights regimes in effectively protecting folklore has led many countries to advocate for a sui generis system for its protection. **A notable step in this direction was the request by the Bolivian government in 1973 to the Director-General of UNESCO to consider drafting an instrument for folklore protection as a protocol to the Universal Copyright Convention (UCC). Subsequent developments within UNESCO and WIPO resulted in the establishment of a Working Group in 1980 to draft Model Provisions for national legislation and international measures for protecting folklore.**

The Working Group reached a broad consensus on the following points

- It is desirable to offer adequate legal protection to folklore.
- Model provisions should be framed to promote such legal protection at the national level.
- These model provisions should be applicable for adoption in countries without existing legislation and those with room for developing existing laws.
- The provisions should allow for protection under copyright and neighbouring rights wherever possible.
- Model provisions for national laws should lead to sub-regional, regional, and ultimately, international protection of folklore creations.

Following these recommendations, UNESCO and WIPO organised further discussions through Expert Committees. The Expert Committee of Governmental Experts on the Intellectual Property Aspects of Protection of Expressions of Folklore adopted the Model Provisions in 1982. These provisions, known as the Model Provisions for National Laws on the Protection of Expressions of Folklore Against Illicit Exploitation and Other Prejudicial Actions, were subsequently recommended to nations for consideration and adoption by the Joint Meeting of the Expert Committee of the Berne Convention and Inter-Governmental Copyright Committee of the UCC in 1983.

Further, in the year 2000, all member states of WIPO established the Intergovernmental Committee on Intellectual Property and Genetic Resources, Traditional Knowledge and Folklore (IGC). The ICG has since conducted text-based negotiations for the development of legal instruments to ensure the protection of traditional knowledge (TK), traditional cultural expressions (TCEs) and genetic resources (GRs).

As recently as 2024, WIPO adopted two new international intellectual property treaties relevant to the protection of Indigenous Peoples' rights- *'WIPO Treaty on Intellectual Property, Genetic Resources and Associated Traditional Knowledge'* and the *'Riyadh Design Law Treaty'*(IWGIA, 2025).

UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage Section acts as a global coordinator for folklore and ICH safeguarding under the 2003 Convention. The organisation provides funding, training, policy guidance, and maintains ICH Lists and has collaborated with over 200 accredited NGOs. The International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR) is another premier scholarly association focused on folk narratives, myths, oral traditions, and legend studies. They organise global congresses and support cross-cultural folklore research.

The Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (USA) conducts cutting-edge research and community-engaged folklore preservation. The center also hosts the Smithsonian Folklife Festival and runs the Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide and maintains huge digital archives and collaborates internationally.

The international efforts to protect folklore have evolved through various legislative measures, treaties, and model provisions. These initiatives aim to address the unique nature of folklore as a community-owned cultural heritage, necessitating a legal framework that diverges from traditional copyright laws to prevent unauthorised exploitation and ensure its preservation for future generations.

ORAL HISTORY DOCUMENTATION

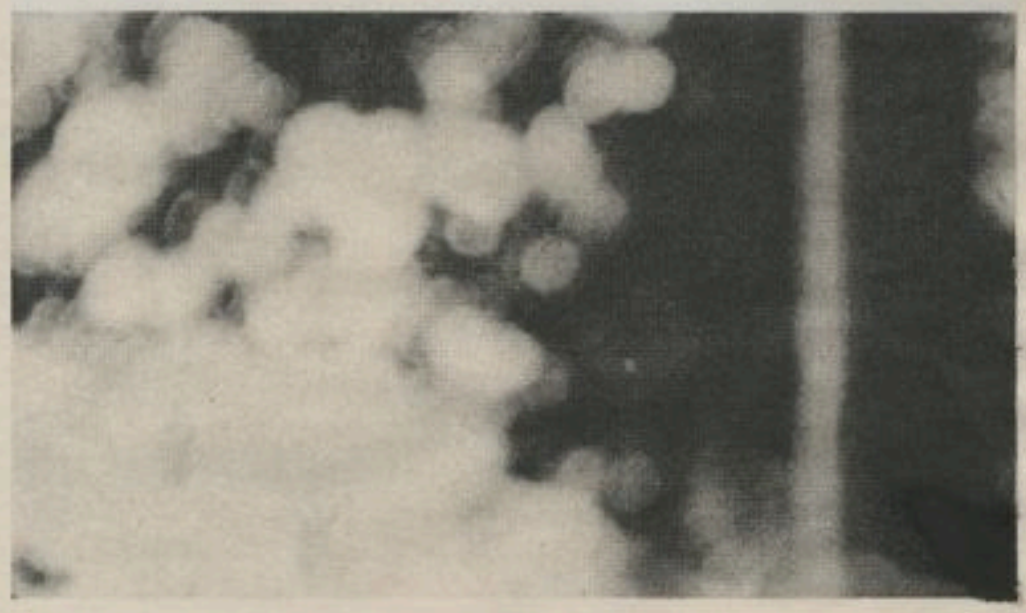
Oral history is a vital method for capturing lived experiences and perspectives that are often absent from traditional historical records. Through interviews, memory, and narrative, oral history expands the boundaries of historical inquiry by centring personal voices, particularly those of marginalised and everyday individuals. The development of this method has been shaped by key scholars who established its theoretical, methodological, and ethical foundations.

Allan Nevins is often regarded as a pioneer of modern oral history. In 1948, he established the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University, emphasising the importance of personal narratives in understanding historical events. Nevins introduced systematic methods for conducting and archiving interviews, laying the groundwork for future oral historians. Another key figure, **W. J. Rorabaugh, highlighted the significance of oral history in public history through his book *The Craft of Public History.*** Rorabaugh stressed the importance of recording firsthand accounts to complement traditional historical sources, emphasising the value of personal experiences in constructing a comprehensive historical record.

Paul Thompson, a leading figure in the field of oral history, made significant contributions with his seminal text 'The Voice of the Past: Oral History' (1978). This work explores the methodology, theory, and practice of oral history, advocating for the use of oral histories to give voice to marginalised and underrepresented groups. Thompson's work emphasises the transformative power of personal narratives in broadening our understanding of history. Alessandro Portelli, in his works, such as '*The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*' (1991), emphasises the importance of personal interpretation and memory in historical narratives. He argues that the subjective nature of oral history can provide deeper insights into cultural and social contexts, enriching the historical record with diverse perspectives.

In oral societies, knowledge is communally held and transmitted, but writing introduces authorship and textual authority. When folklore is archived in writing, it risks becoming the property of the transcriber or editor, rather than the community from which it originated. This creates a tension between the authentic voice of the tradition and the authorial intervention of the scribe, folklorist, or scholar. Scholars like Ruth Finnegan, Linda Dégh, and Richard Bauman have pointed to the problem of authorship and authority in folklore collection and transcription. In oral cultures, stories often have no single owner or originator; they are communally composed and transmitted.

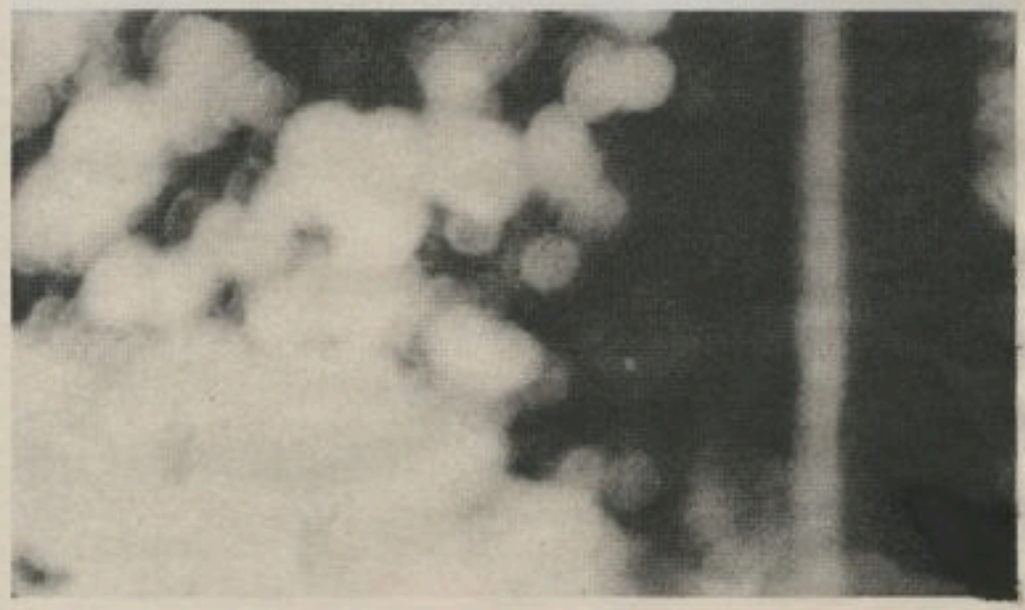
However, once written down, folklore is often attributed to the transcriber, collector, or scholar, who may shape, edit, or "clean up" the narrative. This introduces a colonial or paternalistic dynamic, whereby the folklorist becomes an interpreter and gatekeeper, often at the expense of the original community's voice. Furthermore, in Communications and Cultural Policy (1993), and revisited in Law and Policy in the Americas, Rosemary J. Coombe discusses the tensions between communal authorship in traditional knowledge and Western legal frameworks of intellectual property, which prioritise individual authorship and economic rights. She argues that Indigenous and local communities' folklore is often unprotected or vulnerable in the **face of global cultural industries and copyright regimes.** This work has been pivotal in shaping discussions on cultural sovereignty, moral rights, and postcolonial legal critique.



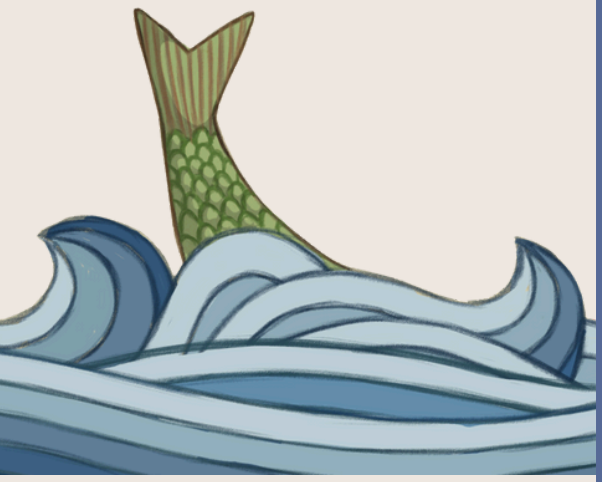
Walter J Ong, in his *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word,* explores the idea that orality represents a primary, natural state of human expression, while literacy is a relatively recent technological intervention that radically reconfigures thought processes.

Ong distinguishes between primary orality, cultures with no knowledge of writing, and secondary orality, which emerges in electronic media environments and exists in conjunction with literacy. He contends that in oral cultures, knowledge is stored and transmitted through mnemonic devices, formulaic expressions, and communal storytelling, all of which are inherently performative and situational.

Thought and expression in such cultures are deeply embedded in lived experience and social immediacy.



By contrast, literacy introduces a mode of abstract, analytic, and decontextualised thinking, fundamentally transforming not only how individuals process information but also how they relate to time, authority, and knowledge. Writing enables the externalisation of memory, the development of logical argumentation, and the capacity for sustained, critical reflection. It also gives rise to the notion of the autonomous, introspective self and facilitates bureaucratic institutions, historical consciousness, and scientific inquiry. Central to Ong's analysis is the idea that writing is a technology, a tool that restructures consciousness. He resists any deterministic view of technological change, but he nevertheless argues that the adoption of writing and print technologies has irreversible effects on cognition and society. The alphabet, in particular, is seen as a profound abstraction that divorces sound from meaning and enables unprecedented analytic and archival capabilities (Ong & Hartley, 2012).



But while documenting oral history, be it community folklore or epics, there are certain ethical considerations that follow. Donald A. Ritchie addresses the ethical challenges associated with oral history in his book *Doing Oral History* (2003). Ritchie delves into issues of consent, confidentiality, and the responsibility of historians to their interviewees, providing guidelines for conducting ethical and respectful interviews. His work underscores the importance of maintaining ethical standards in oral history to protect the rights and dignity of those who share their stories, ensuring that their contributions are preserved with integrity and respect. As oral history continues to shape contemporary understandings of the past, maintaining rigour and respect in its practice remains essential to honouring the voices it seeks to preserve.

PROMINENT ORGANISATIONS IN ORAL HISTORY DOCUMENTATION

A. SMITHSONIAN CENTRE FOR FOLKLIFE AND CULTURAL HERITAGE (USA)

- **Community Collaboration:** They actively engage with the community to identify tradition bearers and storytellers. They also work to form partnerships with local cultural organisations, ensuring that the community has a stake in the collection process.

- **Fieldwork Techniques:** They train fieldworkers and conduct workshops to train fieldworkers in ethnographic methods, including participant observation, interviewing, and recording techniques.

- **Verification of Authenticity:** They cross-check stories with multiple sources within the community to verify their authenticity. Otherwise, they gather extensive contextual information to understand the cultural and historical background of each tale.

B. SCHOOL OF SCOTTISH STUDIES ARCHIVES (SCOTLAND)

- They often host field trips to rural and urban areas. Otherwise, their researchers often spend extended periods within communities to build trust and gather deeper insights.
- Detailed Documentation: They engage in verbatim transcription of oral narratives, including nuances and non-verbal cues. They often provide translations where necessary. They also annotate stories with detailed notes about the context, informant, and cultural significance.
- Verification and Validation: They depend on multiple informants and collect the same story from different people to check for consistency and variations.
- They are big on community involvement: Regularly share findings with the community and involve them in the archiving process. They also conduct workshops and seminars to educate the community about the importance of preserving their folklore.

C.THE AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTRE (USA)

- They combine ethnographic fieldwork with archival research and public programming [PA[1]] to create a comprehensive collection strategy. They also involve experts from various fields such as anthropology, history, and linguistics.

- Participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups.

- Verify stories by cross-referencing them with existing records and other community members. Otherwise, they ensure the authenticity of the collected materials by comparing them with known cultural patterns and historical records.

[PA[1]] Public programming is described as a function performed by archivists to create an awareness of the archives. Gregor (2001, 1) observes that public programming enables archivists to 'promote the use of archives and educate their sponsors and users in how to use them'.

D.THE ARCHIVE OF INDIAN MUSIC (INDIA)

- Their fieldwork is very focused. They target specific regions and communities known for their rich musical and storytelling traditions. Otherwise, they also collaborate with local musicians, historians, and cultural experts to identify key informants.

- Since they work with a very technical sort of content, they have experts review the collected materials to verify their authenticity and cultural significance. They also engage with the community to cross-check the stories and songs, ensuring they are accurately represented.

E. THE CENTRE FOR ORAL AND TRIBAL LITERATURE (INDIA)

- Established by the Sahitya Akademi (India's National Academy of Letters), the Centre's primary function is to systematically document and archive original oral texts (in both audio and audio-visual format) from various tribal languages and communities across India.

- This fieldwork and ethnographic approach are considered crucial to adequately protect oral-literature samples and prevent misrepresentation. Researchers and scholars work directly with tribal communities for the transcription and analysis of the material.

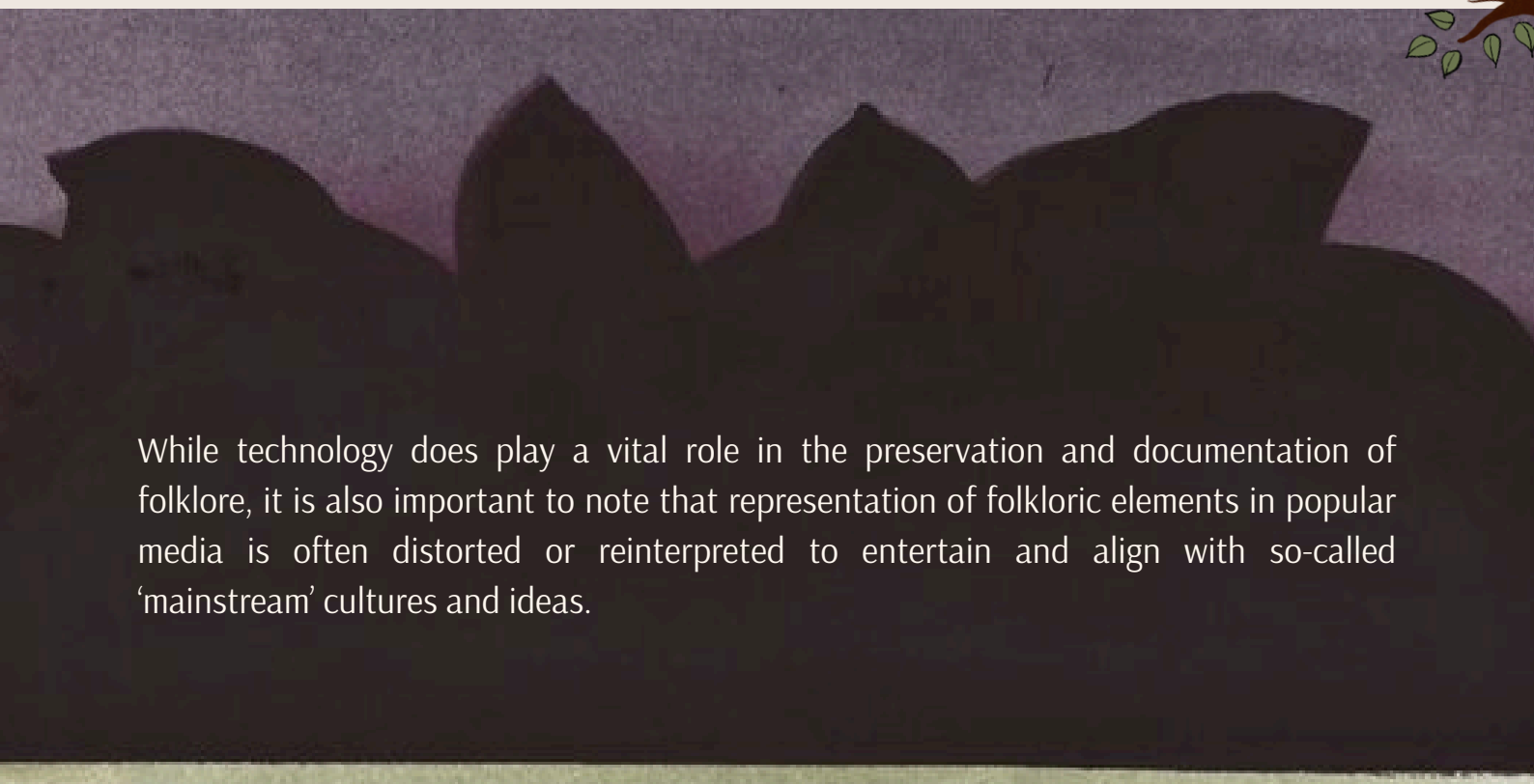
- The Centre digitally preserves these records by creating metadata for all recorded materials and uploading them to online repositories, envisioning it to be a ‘House of Voices’, accessible to all.

DIGITAL ARCHIVING AND TECHNOLOGY

The integration of digital archiving and technology in folklore preservation is explored by P. Sudhakaran. **Sudhakaran's work on the use of mobile applications for folklore documentation among indigenous communities in Northeast India highlights how digital tools empower local stakeholders** to participate in the preservation and revitalisation of their cultural heritage in the digital age.

Digital archiving is a vital tool in preserving traditional knowledge, including folklore, medicinal practices, agricultural wisdom, and oral histories which remain under-documented or undocumented.

As Prajna Dasmohapatra asserts, these traditional knowledge systems remain vulnerable to erasure in the absence of formal preservation. Despite partial codification in regional scripts, much of this indigenous knowledge remains inaccessible to broader publics. Digital archiving emerges, therefore, not merely as a storage tool but as a form of cultural empowerment, ensuring that communities reclaim and sustain their intellectual heritage in modern, accessible formats. She also critiques the Indian intellectual property regime for being insufficient to protect traditional knowledge, as its mechanisms often cater to individualistic, Western notions of authorship incompatible with collective, evolving, and anonymous cultural expressions found in folklore (Dasmohapatra, 2025).



While technology does play a vital role in the preservation and documentation of folklore, it is also important to note that representation of folkloric elements in popular media is often distorted or reinterpreted to entertain and align with so-called 'mainstream' cultures and ideas.

This shift from oral traditions to a more permanent form of documentation leaves in the hands of the archivist the power to reinterpret as per their own views. While not strictly about folklore, Spivak in her '*Can the Subaltern Speak*' interrogates if a marginalised community can really 'speak' when their representation is mediated by those situated in a different socio political sphere; parallels can be drawn to the work of archivists and the question of who has access to new archival technology. Thus, who has access to the tools of contemporary technology, is then a significant aspect to evaluate. It is often the case that an individual outside the community takes up the task of representing the community they are not part of. Folk elements in popular media, rather than being created, reimagined and compiled by someone from within the community, is done by someone who is outside the community (Naithani, 1997; Narayan, 1993).

Seema Sharma rightly highlights the issue in her paper titled '*Folklore Through Popular Media–The Representation of the 'Subaltern*" in the following words "The dissemination of folk traditions through such mediums as films, television, or comic books, faces the risk of homogenisation of divergent cultures by marginalising local and regional cultural variants." Thus in the contemporary retelling of folklore and folktales, discriminated religious, regional, caste, class and gender identities are marginalised. **Non-religious, non-vedic and non-sanskritised spheres of the society and their individuality is merged under a single dominant narrative, resulting in the loss of agency of the marginalised to navigate and dictate the new-age technological potentiality and the wider perception of their own cultural practices and lived experiences.**

INITIATIVES IN DIGITAL PRESERVATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE IN INDIA

1. The Digital India Programme

The Digital India Programme, initiated by the Government of India in 2015, contributes immensely towards digital preservation of cultural heritage by using technology for preserving and developing India's deep cultural and historical wealth. Initiated under the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), this programme is centred on digitisation, open access, and the development of digital infrastructure so that cultural assets are preserved over the long term and are made available (MeitY, 2022) [9].

2. Digitisation of Cultural Objects

The scheme has encouraged the digitisation of manuscripts, rare books, paintings, sculptures, and ancient documents and artefacts housed in libraries, museums, and archives. Large-scale digitisation is being carried out by institutions like the National Archives of India (NAI) and the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) through this initiative. National Digital Library of India (NDLI) enables the digitisation of rare manuscripts, old books, paintings, and traditional knowledge systems so that they are available for a long period of time.

3. Construction of Centralised Digital Repositories

Under Digital India, various digital platforms have been set up, including:

- National Digital Library of India (NDLI) - A centralised repository of digital academic and cultural material.
- National Virtual Library of India (NVLI) - An integrated platform for digitised cultural knowledge.
- Indian Culture Portal - A government program to present India's rich heritage in digital collections:

Online Access and Public Participation: These virtual platforms provide cultural heritage resources freely to scholars, students, and the general public. This democratises access to archival materials and opens up global participation. The Digital India Program has transformed preservation of cultural heritage by bringing forward cutting-edge technology, thus safeguarding India's rich history and traditions so they are not lost for generations to come. It is an imperative program in guarding against data loss, the conservation of heritage, and facilitation of global cultural knowledge preservation.

4. National Digital Library of India (NDLI)

The National Digital Library of India (NDLI) has the key responsibility in the digital protection of cultural heritage through a systemic, accessible, and organised corpus of digital items. It has been designed and developed by the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Kharagpur under the Department of Education, and it is a huge virtual platform that assimilates multidisciplinary sources of knowledge through books, manuscripts, ancient historical documents, and audio-visual content (NDLI, 2023).

5. Multilingual and Inclusive Framework

Having content in various Indian languages, NDLI fosters linguistic diversity in digital preservation. This is essential to preserve regional literature, oral traditions, and ancient scripts. NDLI is a prime initiative in preserving, conserving and promoting India's cultural heritage through the digital format. Using technology, it makes sure that India's past knowledge is available for future generations to access.

6. National Mission for Manuscripts (NMM)

The National Mission for Manuscripts (NMM), initiated in 2003 by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, is crucial to the digital preservation of India's rich manuscript heritage. With millions of ancient and rare manuscripts inscribed on palm leaves, birch bark, and handmade paper, the NMM seeks to document, digitise, and preserve these precious cultural records for posterity in a way that withstands the temporal decomposition (NMM, 2023). Using high resolution imaging and metadata documentation, the mission preserves manuscripts that are likely to deteriorate.

7. Manuscript Conservation Centres (MCCs)

NMM has set up Manuscript Conservation Centres (MCCs) throughout India, where professionals conserve and digitise ancient manuscripts. The centers apply scientific conservation methods to avoid physical deterioration prior to digitisation. National Digital Manuscripts Library (NDML): NMM has created the National Digital Manuscripts Library (NDML), an online database that offers scholars and researchers access to digitised manuscripts. This effort provides global access to India's heritage texts in a manner that secures them.

8. National Virtual Library of India (NVLI)

The National Virtual Library of India (NVLI) is an important initiative by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, for digital preservation and dissemination of India's cultural heritage. The NVLI has been developed with the help of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay and acts as a universal digital repository containing content from several cultural institutions like libraries, museums, and archives (NVLI, 2023).

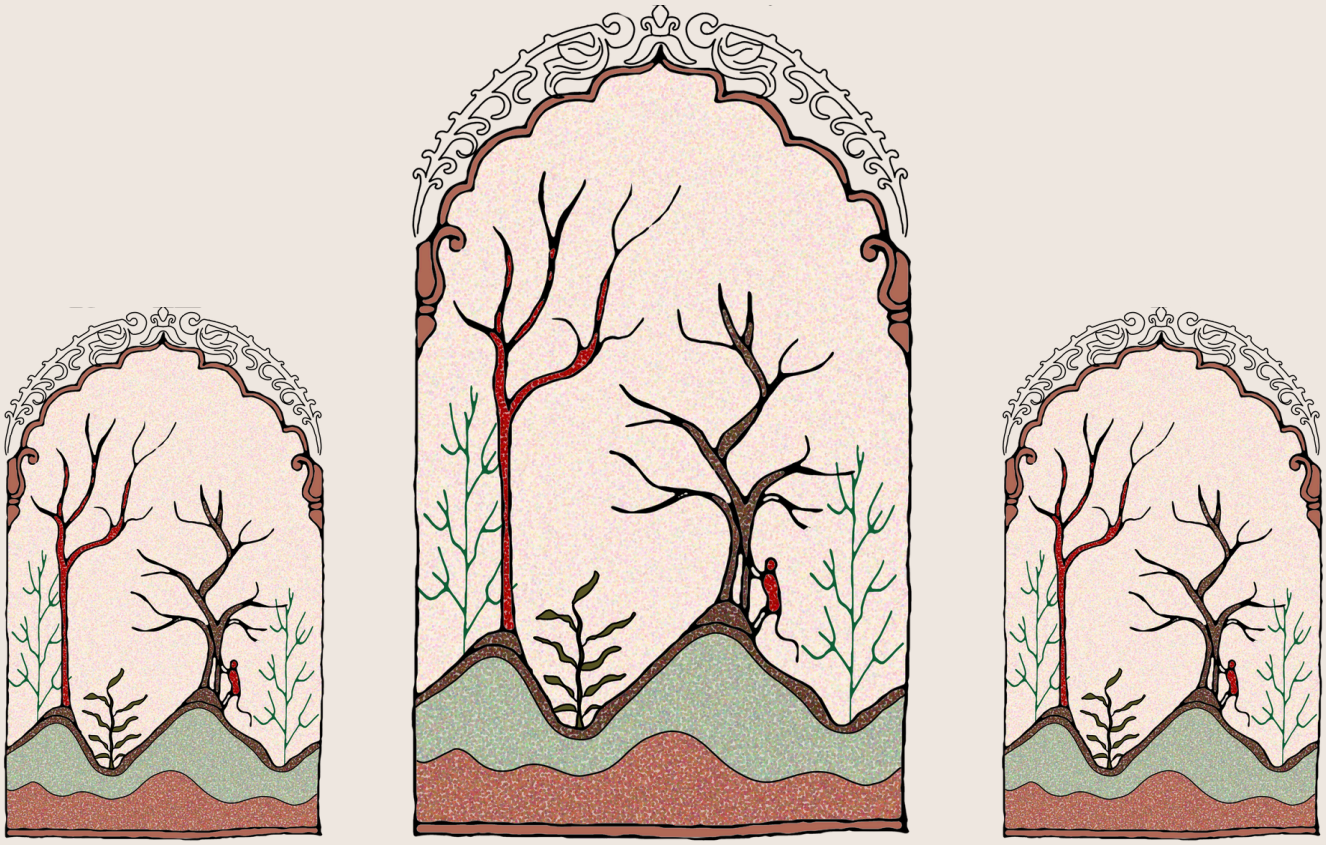
9. Indian Culture Portal

The Indian Culture Portal, introduced by the Government of India in 2019 under the Ministry of Culture, is a comprehensive online portal devoted to the conservation, promotion, and dissemination of the rich cultural heritage of India. Designed with IGNCA (Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts), it is a hub repository of digitised cultural relics, manuscripts, artworks, and historical records (Indian Culture Portal, 2023).

10. National Archives of India (NAI)

National Archives of India (NAI): The National Archives of India (NAI), Ministry of Culture, Government of India, is responsible for digital preservation of cultural heritage through its Digitisation Project. NAI, which was founded in 1891, is the repository of India's historical records, government records, and manuscripts, and is responsible for their long-term preservation and access (NAI, 2023).

Understanding the global context of folklore digitisation is essential not just for comparison, but for critically reflecting on the values, challenges, and evolving ethics of preserving intangible cultural heritage in the digital age. As traditional knowledge systems across the world grapple with loss, distortion, and appropriation, international experiences offer valuable insights into how technology can be sensitively and effectively used to archive, interpret, and share cultural narratives. Engaging with these global approaches allows us to question dominant frameworks, identify gaps in local practices, and consider alternative models that centre community agency, contextual integrity, and ethical stewardship. In doing so, we begin to see folklore digitisation not merely as a technical task, but as a cultural responsibility, one that is shaped by transnational debates around ownership, authenticity, and the future of collective memory.



IMPORTANT INTERNATIONAL DIGITAL ARCHIVES

(A) PARADISEC- PACIFIC AND REGIONAL ARCHIVE FOR DIGITAL SOURCES IN ENDANGERED CULTURES

PARASISEC (Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures) is an important international archive that works to preserve endangered languages and oral traditions, especially from the Pacific region. It has collected over 17,000 hours of audio and 3,300 hours of video recordings, covering more than 1,300 languages and cultural practices. One of PARADISEC's key strengths is its focus on detailed and standardised metadata, which helps users understand the context of each recording—such as who recorded it, where, and when. The archive also ensures that local communities have open access to their cultural materials and can make decisions about how they are shared. By connecting with global digital platforms like OLAC and TROVE, PARADISEC balances international accessibility with respect for community ownership. This approach supports both academic research and cultural revitalisation, making the archive a valuable resource for scholars and indigenous communities alike.

(B) THE PASSAMAQUODDY DIGITAL REPATRIATION

The Passamaquoddy Digital Repatriation is a project in the United States is an example of how indigenous communities can reclaim and manage their cultural heritage through digital tools. In this case, the Passamaquoddy Tribe recovered wax-cylinder recordings made by an anthropologist in 1890, which contained traditional songs and stories. With support from the Library of Congress and using the Mukurtu content management platform, the tribe was able to regain control over these materials. They applied Traditional Knowledge (TK) labels and access protocols that reflect their cultural values and decide who can view or listen to certain content. This process not only helps preserve the tribe's oral history but also strengthens cultural identity and supports the revitalisation of the Passamaquoddy language and traditions.

The International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, celebrated every year on August 9th, has an apt theme this year- 'Indigenous Peoples and AI: Defending Rights, Shaping Futures.' The United Nations notes that AI can create vastly advantageous scenarios for bridging intergenerational gaps and fostering intercommunity communications and collaboration.

At the same time, the UN recognises the infinitesimal input of the indigenous in training and developing AI systems, leading to glaring yet inexorable misuse and appropriation of indigenous knowledge systems and identities.

Following this trajectory, Astrid Schomaker, Executive Secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity in her statement for this occasion made the following note-

"...Artificial Intelligence is transforming how knowledge is generated and applied. For Indigenous Peoples, this brings both challenges and opportunities. Inadequate applications of AI can undermine the principles that safeguard traditional knowledge, including consent, control, and data sovereignty..."

To reinforce this point, another observation made by the UN- "To unlock AI's full potential, Indigenous Peoples must be respected as rights-holders, co-creators, and decision-makers. Meaningful inclusion, data sovereignty, and culturally grounded innovation are key to ensuring AI empowers their communities."

STORY COLLECTION AND ARCHIVAL DEVELOPMENT AT CCF

STEP 1 - CLARIFYING THE PURPOSE OF FOLKTALE COLLECTION:

Before beginning collection, it is important to clearly define why we are documenting these stories. At CCF, our key purposes are:

- Preservation- to safeguard oral traditions at risk of fading.
- Archiving- to create an organised and accessible record for long-term use.
- Research- to support a deeper understanding of cultural practices, social structures, and local worldviews.

A clear purpose ensures ethical engagement and consistency in fieldwork.

STEP 2 - RESEARCH AND TRAINING:

Begin by reviewing existing literature on Indian folktales to understand regional contexts, narrative forms, and gaps in current documentation. This foundational research will help guide collection priorities and avoid duplication. Simultaneously, assemble and train a team of fieldworkers in basic ethnographic methods, oral history interviewing techniques, and ethical considerations. Fieldworkers must be well-versed in local languages, dialects, and cultural norms to build trust with storytellers and ensure accurate and respectful documentation.

STEP 3 - ETHICAL PREPARATION AND INFORMED CONSENT:

Prepare clear and accessible consent forms that explain the purpose of the folktale collection, how the material will be used, and the rights of the storytellers, including the option to remain anonymous. It is also important to note that consent is not static but a dynamic exchange, which can be revoked if or when the consenting party feels uncomfortable or unsure about progressing further.
These forms should be available in the local language(s) and conveyed orally when necessary to ensure full understanding. Fieldworkers must also remain sensitive to local customs, storytelling protocols, and the cultural significance of the narratives being shared. Respect for community values and practices is essential to conducting ethical and responsible documentation.

STEP 4 - INTERVIEW TECHNIQUES:

- **Semi-Structured Interviews**: Use a semi-structured format to allow flexibility in conversations while ensuring key topics are covered.
- **Recording Tools**: Utilise high-quality audio and video recording equipment to capture the narratives. Ensure backup devices are available.
- **Environment**: Conduct interviews in a comfortable setting where the informant feels at ease. Avoid distractions and ensure privacy.
- **Prompting Techniques**: Use open-ended questions to encourage detailed storytelling. Avoid leading questions that could influence the narrative.
- **Respect for Narratives**: Allow the informant to tell their story in their own way. Do not interrupt or correct them.
- **Supplementary Information**: Collect contextual information about the story, including its cultural significance, variations, and the informant's background.

STEP 5 - TRANSCRIPTION AND TRANSLATION:

- **Verbatim:** Transcribe the recordings verbatim, including non-verbal cues and expressions.

- **Translation:** If the story is in a local language, provide an accurate translation. Employ bilingual experts to ensure the fidelity of translations.

- **Metadata**: Annotate each story with metadata, including the date, location, informant details (with consent), and contextual notes.

- **Classification**: Categorise the stories by themes, genres, and motifs for easier retrieval and analysis.

STEP 6 - ANALYSIS AND DISSEMINATION:

Conduct a systematic analysis of the collected narratives, focusing on recurring themes, motifs, symbols, and cultural insights. This process should aim to uncover both community-specific worldviews and broader regional patterns. Comparative analysis with existing folklore collections can help identify distinctive features as well as shared narrative elements. The findings should be disseminated through accessible formats, such as reports, digital archives, or community events, ensuring that both academic and local audiences can engage with the material.

REPRESENTATION IN FOLKLORE

REPRESENTATION IN FOLKLORE

(A) CASTE

The representation of caste in Indian folklore is a complex and sensitive issue that requires careful consideration and scholarly attention. Folklore often reflects the social hierarchies and cultural dynamics of the societies from which it originates, making it a valuable source for understanding historical and contemporary caste relations. However, this also means that folklore can perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce social inequalities if not critically examined.

Folklore, by its nature, encapsulates the lived experiences, beliefs, and values of a community. As such, it often includes narratives that depict the interactions between different caste groups, the roles assigned to each caste, and the societal norms governing these relationships (Ramanujan, 1991).

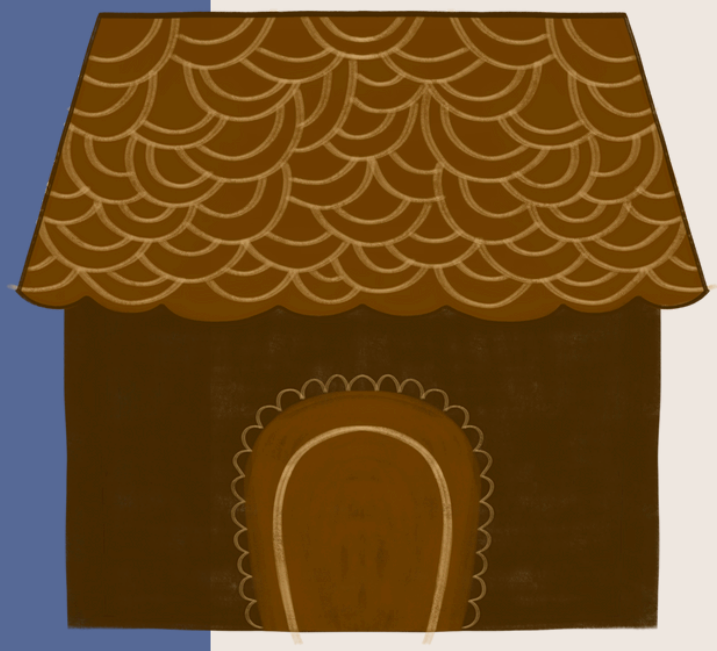
These narratives can offer insights into the historical context of caste systems, shedding light on how caste identities and hierarchies were constructed and maintained.

When dealing with caste in folklore, it is crucial to approach the material with an awareness of the potential for reinforcing harmful stereotypes. Scholars must critically analyse the power dynamics embedded in these stories and consider the perspectives and voices of marginalised caste groups (Narayan, 1997).

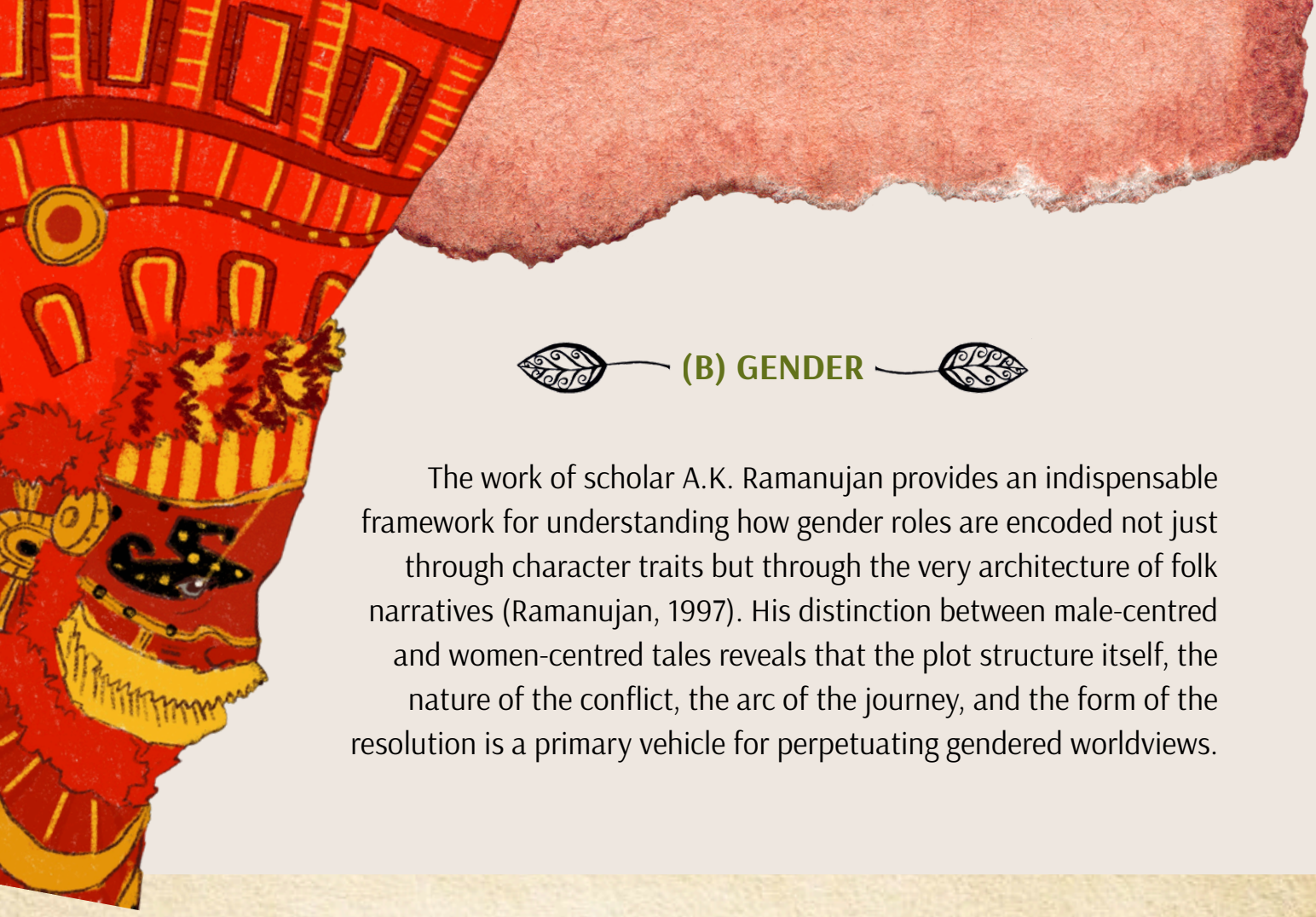
This involves questioning who is telling the story, whose voices are amplified, and whose experiences are silenced or marginalised.

For example, many traditional folktales and songs may glorify the dominant caste narratives while depicting lower caste characters in subordinate or negative roles. These representations can perpetuate caste-based discrimination and social stigma if not addressed thoughtfully. Therefore, it is essential to contextualise these stories within their historical and cultural framework, acknowledging the biases and limitations inherent in them.

Inclusive and Ethical Approaches Towards Preservation: To ethically preserve and present folklore that involves caste narratives, it is important to adopt inclusive approaches that give voice to all community members, especially those from marginalised castes. This can be achieved through collaborative projects that involve scholars, folklorists, and community members from diverse caste backgrounds (Subramanian, 2008)



Such collaborations ensure a more balanced representation of caste experiences and help to highlight the resilience and contributions of marginalised groups within the folklore tradition.



(B) GENDER

The work of scholar A.K. Ramanujan provides an indispensable framework for understanding how gender roles are encoded not just through character traits but through the very architecture of folk narratives (Ramanujan, 1997). His distinction between male-centred and women-centred tales reveals that the plot structure itself, the nature of the conflict, the arc of the journey, and the form of the resolution is a primary vehicle for perpetuating gendered worldviews.

In male-centred tales, the narrative follows the classic hero's quest. The protagonist, typically a young man, leaves his family home, overcomes obstacles, slays monsters, and wins a princess (or several) along with a kingdom. Women in these stories are secondary figures; they are, as Ramanujan notes, often "no more than pawns or prizes or helpers in his life's game". The narrative arc culminates in his marriage, a resolution that signifies the successful establishment of a new patriarchal lineage and the hero's full integration into the social order as a man of power and status. (Ramanujan, 1997).

Conversely, in women-centred tales, marriage is frequently the beginning of the heroine's troubles, not the triumphant conclusion. Her "life task," as Ramanujan observes, often becomes "saving, rescuing, or reviving a man, often solving riddles on his behalf". Her antagonists and allies are typically other women, which confines her struggles to a female-dominated, often domestic sphere.

Even when she is the central protagonist, her agency is directed toward the men in her life. These stories, though usually told by women for women, paradoxically feature heroines who "lack the agency and independence that men possess, whether as protagonists or narrators".

The Kannada folktale ‘A Flowering Tree,’ translated and analysed by Ramanujan, serves as a powerful case study of this dynamic. The story's heroine, a young woman from a poor family, possesses the magical ability to transform herself into a beautiful, fragrant flowering tree. This innate creative power is immediately framed in terms of its utility for others. Initially, she uses it to help her mother by selling the flowers. Later, a prince, captivated by her power, marries her, and her ability is subsumed into her wifely duties. Her power then becomes the source of her brutal exploitation. At the behest of her jealous and greedy sister-in-law, she is forced to transform, and her branches are violently torn, leaving her a mutilated "wounded carcass" with "only half a body" when she returns to human form. Her eventual restoration to wholeness is not achieved through her own power but is dependent on the patient love and care of the prince who finds her disfigured form. The tale vividly illustrates the arc of female creativity being co-opted by family and patriarchy, leading to extreme vulnerability and an ultimate reliance on a male saviour for redemption.

Ramanujan's framework thus reveals a fundamental asymmetry in the folkloric conception of agency. Male agency is projective and world-building; it is about leaving home, conquering the unknown, and establishing a new order. Female agency, in contrast, is largely reactive and restorative; it is about solving a man's problems, enduring suffering within a pre-existing domestic sphere, and repairing broken relationships. This structural logic, embedded in the very DNA of the plot, represents a more profound and subtle form of gender conditioning than overt stereotypes.

The narrative of 'A Flowering Tree' is a potent metaphor for this process: the heroine's creative power (her body as a tree) is violently exploited, and her wholeness can only be restored through the actions of a man. The story's plot teaches a lesson about the nature of gender: men build power in the world, while women navigate and repair relationships within a world defined by men.

In Prem Choudhry's analysis of masculinity in North Indian rural oral traditions, he lays emphasis on how gender roles are constructed within a framework of patriarchy that reinforces male dominance through the subordination of women.

In this context, any man who listens to his wife is seen as relinquishing his masculinity and adopting a feminised, submissive position. Women, on the other hand, are labelled as overbearing or controlling if they exhibit assertiveness. This binary enforces rigid gender roles, where men are expected to assert control, often through violence, and women are expected to endure it (Chowdhry, 2015). These narratives emphasise the social pressure on men to maintain power and on women to remain within the confines of passivity.

As documented by Chowdhry, upper-caste women in North India have long maintained a tradition of folk songs, authored and performed exclusively in women-only spaces during rituals and ceremonies. These songs serve as a powerful counter-discourse, openly mocking patriarchal authority, critiquing male dominance, and celebrating female sexuality and desire, often featuring lovers from marginalised castes or communities. These performances create a temporary autonomous zone where the official ideology of female passivity and chastity is gleefully subverted.

One such example is a folk song where two sisters-in-law (bhābhī and nanad) praise an acrobat's attractiveness over that of the elder sister's husband:

"naṭ ko khele bālūre rate hāth
karulā kāṅā gokhḍu jī rāj
dekho bāi jī naṭkā ko rūp
tharā bīrā se do til āglo ī rāj
jāo bhābhī naṭkā kī sāth
mhārā bīrā ne praṅādayān dūsrā jī rāj
praṅāo bāi jī do-e-cār
hum sarīkhi kāl nā mileṅ
mhārā bīrā catur sujān
tum sarīkhi ghaḍ le kāṭh kī ji rāj
ghaḍ lo bāi jī do cār
le nā mukhaṛe na bole kayā kāṭh kī jī rāj"
(Chowdhry, 2015, p. 25)

“The acrobat is performing,
With sand glistening in his hands
His earrings twinkle in the sun.
Look sister-in-law, how handsome he is,
Much more alluring than your brother.
Go sister-in-law with the acrobat,
We’ll find another wife for my brother.” (Chowdhry, 2015, p. 25)

These subversive songs are not merely cathartic; they expose the gap between ideology and practice, provoking societal backlash from groups like upper-caste men and reformist movements such as the Arya Samaj, who labeled the songs obscene and attempted to suppress them (Chowdhry, 2015, p. 22, 27). This effort to police women's expression is part of a broader societal erasure of their contributions, particularly in the domestic sphere where their labour is dismissed as ‘duty.’ For instance, while a woman's cooking is often unacknowledged, a male chef's work is considered ‘art’ and is monetarily compensated. A folktale from Karnataka starkly illustrates this devalued status, narrating a story where a husband beats his wife for not understanding the name of a dish he wants. The tale's lack of a moral resolution underscores its function as a reflection of the daily realities and violence many women face.

Similarly, women in some love-tales fight back, even if they eventually submit. Folklore is seen as a medium for the oppressed to articulate grievances. In Bhojpuri folk traditions, despite male out-migration causing women to take on work and social responsibilities, their empowered facet is often underplayed. However, some folk songs by low-caste women are described as powerful symbols of resistance, sometimes quite shrill and understood to be vulgar. Women in some songs are shown arguing or fighting back against lack of trust or unequal partnerships. Indigenous festival songs can serve as a mode of feminine erotic expression, with no shame in openly expressing desire for husbands, though often centred on the husband.

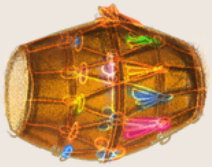
It is important to note that many widely known collections of folktales by women, or featuring women, have been collected, translated, and edited by men within the field of folkloristics. This phenomenon carries significant implications for the way women are portrayed within these works. While such collections may be created with the purpose of advancing women's representation or preserving the nuances of women's cultural, political and social experiences, they often inadvertently reflect a male perspective of what it entails to be a woman.

One good example is *Folk-Tales of Bengal* by Lal Behari Dey, published in 1883. Contemporary feminist readings of this work highlight the creation of a 'manly world' where women are often subjugated, yet the world cannot last without women, thus, they are treated with respect and care. The woman in these tales lacks the status of an autonomous being. We carry these stories with us as an important record of fairy tales collected from Bengali women in their native language. But it is important to note that writers, compilers, both Indian and British folklorists were free to edit and reimagine collected tales as they saw fit (Narayan, 1993), thereby imbibing their own biases and worldviews into what have now become standard points of reference.

A journal article by Kirin Narayan published in Asian Folklore Studies in 1968 recounts a dance song in Punjabi performed by women in a birthday celebration in 1990. This song is a lively parody resulting in the inversion of the image of the "modest, hard-working and submissive daughter-in-law" (Narayan, 1993). The song describes a so-called 'shameless' daughter-in-law who uses lipstick, paints her nails, powders her face, and has little interest in serving her husband (Narayan, 1993). While this performance mainly acts as an expression of the anxieties of a community of women being corrupted by modernity, it does leave one with the space to contemplate the roles and behaviour patterns a society prescribes to a woman.

(C) CLASS: POST MARXIST

Applying the framework of historical materialism, particularly as adapted for the Indian context by the pioneering historian D.D. Kosambi, reveals folklore as a key ideological arena for class struggle. In this view, narratives are not simply entertainment but are symbolic representations of material conflicts over resources, surplus, and social power.



Kosambi provided a foundational Marxist analysis of Indian history, moving beyond simplistic economic determinism to articulate a more nuanced relationship between the material base and the cultural superstructure. He famously argued that "caste is class at a primitive level of production" (Chakraborty, 2025). He saw religion, myth, and ritual as a sophisticated ideological apparatus used to extract surplus from the primary producer with "minimum coercion" by giving divine sanction to the social order.

This framework allows for an understanding of folklore as a site where class conflict is fought out symbolically. Folktales become repositories of the resistance of common people against the forces of social oppression, economic exploitation, giving verbal recourse to the dissent, and unfulfilled desires of the working class.

The play *Charandas Chor* by Habib Tanvir, which is deeply rooted in the folk traditions of Chhattisgarh, serves as a powerful case study of this dynamic. The play dramatises class consciousness by pitting its protagonist, Charandas, an "honest thief" from the lower class, against the exploitative village landlord and the corrupt state apparatus, represented by the queen and her ministers. The central conflict is not just over material goods but over the very definition of morality. Charandas, despite being a thief, adheres to a strict code of never lying, making him morally superior to the lawful authorities who are depicted as hypocritical and unjust. The villagers recognise this and express their solidarity through song, celebrating him for stealing from the rich to give to the poor: "Charandas is not a thief, not a thief, no way! Palaces and mansions, he'll break into and steal, the poor man's hut is safe from him, he gives us a good deal". This is a clear depiction of collective action and the formation of a class-based counter-narrative.

What this case reveals is that class struggle within Indian folklore is uniquely fought on the terrain of *dharma* and morality. The dominant ideology is framed in religious and moral terms, as Kosambi argued. Therefore, the subaltern resistance seen in folklore is not a rejection of *dharma* itself, but an attempt to co-opt and redefine it to serve its own interests.

Charandas doesn't argue for an amoral world; he claims to be the truly honest one, thereby exposing the moral bankruptcy of the elite. The villagers' song is not a simple demand for economic redistribution; it is a moral judgment that redefines theft as a form of justice. Folklore thus becomes the ideological battlefield where the oppressed fight back, not by rejecting the dominant value system, but by claiming to be its truest adherents.

According to Sikha Devi Nath, Marxist folklorists argue that folk literature, primarily created by the working class, symbolically represents class struggle between the "haves" and "have-nots" (Nath, 2023). This class division and conflict are rooted in material reality and economic relations, such as feudalistic or capitalistic structures, where powerful landlords exploit poor landless or indentured labourers. Folklore is interpreted as both a reflection and a weapon of this class conflict, allowing oppressed classes to articulate their grievances and resistance against exploitative systems, often through metaphors and allegories, such as speaking animals representing oppressive and oppressed classes. For instance, in the Assamese folktale 'Tejimola,' the stepmother symbolises the affluent exploitative class, Tejimola represents the oppressed class, and the merchant father is seen as the middle class or petty bourgeoisie. These fantastical elements in folklore also provide a form of escape from the harsh realities of oppression and discrimination.

POLITICS OF FOLKLORE TRANSLATION

The politics surrounding folklore translation has been a subject of significant scholarly inquiry, with several critical works shedding light on its complexities and implications. **Among these, Michel-Rolph Trouillot's seminal work- *Silencing the Past*: *Power and the Production* of History stands out as a foundational text. Trouillot explores how power dynamics shape the selection, interpretation, and translation of historical narratives, emphasising the silences and omissions that occur in the process.** Applying Trouillot's insights to folklore translation, scholars have interrogated how dominant cultural, political, and linguistic forces influence which folk narratives are translated, how they are interpreted, and whose voices are amplified or marginalised.

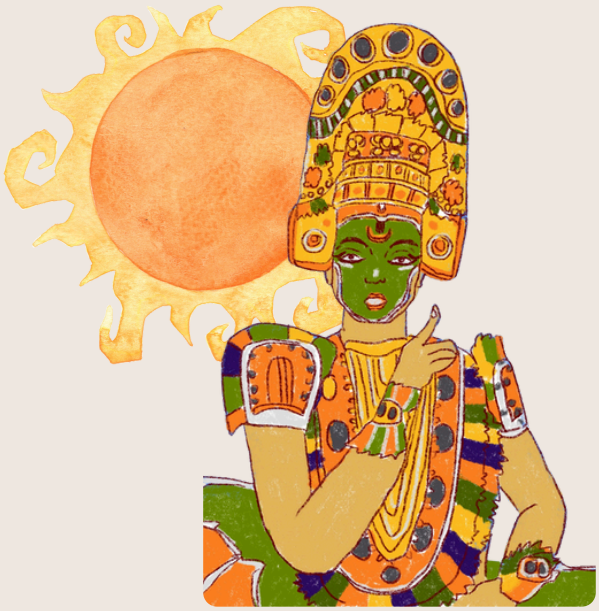
Similarly, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of "strategic essentialism" has been influential in discussions of folklore translation politics. In her work "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Spivak argues that marginalised groups may strategically deploy essentialist narratives to resist dominant discourses and assert their agency. Applied to folklore translation, this concept prompts scholars to consider how translations can either reinforce hegemonic narratives or challenge them by amplifying subaltern voices and perspectives.

In *Documentation and Archiving of Folklore: Cultural Rights of Communities* (2004), M. D. Muthukumaraswamy critiques dominant archival paradigms that treat folklore as static cultural data extracted by external researchers. He emphasises that documentation must respect the cultural rights and agency of source communities, particularly in India's diverse oral traditions.

The essay argues for a shift from institutional to community-centred archiving practices, where local knowledge-holders actively participate in deciding what, how, and why their folklore is documented. Muthukumaraswamy underscores the ethical imperative of free, prior, and informed consent, warning against exploitative preservation models that strip traditions of their contextual and performative essence. He advocates for living archives, dynamic, accessible, and reflexive systems that foster intergenerational transmission. The paper also calls for recognition of folklore as intangible cultural heritage, requiring not just conservation but cultural empowerment. Ultimately, the essay reframes folklore documentation as a dialogic and rights-based process, essential for decolonising knowledge production and safeguarding cultural sovereignty.

During the colonial period in India, oral narratives, full of the complexities of Indian life, were passed through a strategic filter which transformed them both linguistically and ideologically. The resulting translated texts (in English) were tailored to suit the narrative needs of the colonial state, presenting a selected, often distorted, image of India that justified British rule, entertained European audiences, and cemented the intellectual authority of the coloniser, while simultaneously suppressing the authentic voice and contemporary reality of the colonised. One such example of this is seen in Sadhana Naithani's *The Colonizer-Folklorist,* which examines the work of Richard C. Temple, a British colonial officer whose folklore collection, *Legends of Punjab* (1884–85), was deeply entangled with imperial ideology. His efforts were explicitly political, aimed at understanding and controlling the colonised through their cultural expressions. His translation process not only marginalised native voices but filtered their narratives through multiple layers of mediation to fit colonial sensibilities.

Most notably, Temple's work erased dissenting voices and contemporary realities, omitting tales of resistance or critique of British rule. While his work appeared to valourise Indian folklore, it simultaneously portrayed Indian narrators as primitive, thereby reinforcing colonial hierarchies and impeding the development of indigenous folkloristics. By taking on these translation projects, the work lent a humane image to the colonial state itself, that of being interested in the culture of the colonised land and not just in its economic exploitation (Naithani, 2003), legitimising their colonial project.



The British folklore collectors, typically high-ranking civil or military officers, just like Temple, utilised their administrative and political authority to facilitate their research and the subsequent translation of folklore.

This direct connection between political power and scholarly pursuit meant that the act of translating allowed the political authority to simultaneously claim intellectual authority over the ruled (Naithani, 2003). The collector's "judgments are correct" because the colonised subjects "don't know their own past and history". In this game of hide and reveal, a narrative is created which is universal in its application and particular in its implication (Naithani, 2003). This epistemic hierarchy enables a selective presentation of folklore that obscures power relations under the guise of cultural preservation. The depiction of India, the 'Folklorist', and the 'Tales' is couched in terms of universal beauty, zeal, and antiquity, and were this place not called India, it could be anywhere in the world (Naithani, 2003). As a result, the folklore appears as part of a shared human heritage rather than a living, contested cultural practice rooted in colonial domination. This strategy, cloaked in aesthetic admiration, serves to depoliticise the folklore and elevate the figure of the collector as a benevolent custodian of global heritage, rather than an agent of imperial control.

Furthermore, Edward Said's notion of 'Orientalism' offers valuable insights into the power dynamics inherent in the translation of folklore from non-Western cultures. Said's critique of Western representations of the 'Orient' highlights how translations can perpetuate stereotypes, exoticise cultures, and reinforce colonial hierarchies. **According to Said, the Orient is represented by the West as the "Other", a cultural, political, and intellectual construction that defines the East (especially the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia) in contrast to the West's own self-image.** This representation is not based on the reality or complexity of Eastern societies, but on a set of repeated tropes and stereotypes that serve to dominate and restructure the Orient. Oriental cultures are portrayed as mysterious, sensual, and irrational, fascinating but inferior. This exoticisation reduces complex societies to objects of aesthetic pleasure or curiosity. Scholars drawing on Said's work analyse how translations of non-Western folklore are often filtered through Western lenses, leading to distortions, misinterpretations, and erasures of indigenous meanings and contexts.

The scholarship on folklore translation reveals it to be far more than a linguistic exercise. From colonial projects like Richard Temple's *Legends of Punjab* to contemporary debates on community-centred archiving, translation has repeatedly been used to shape whose stories are heard and how they are framed. Thinkers such as Trouillot, Spivak, and Said expose how translation can silence voices or exoticise the "Other," while also suggesting ways it might be reclaimed as a tool for subaltern agency and cultural empowerment.

Together, these works underscore that translating folklore is never neutral, it constructs histories and redefines cultural ownership. Any future approach must therefore grapple with this legacy— shifting from extraction and distortion toward translation practices rooted in respect of the communities whose stories are told.

POLITICS OF PRESERVATION

The politics of folklore preservation encompass complex negotiations of which cultural expressions are promoted, preserved, and valourised, over which are neglected, marginalised, or erased. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital provides a useful framework for understanding these dynamics. In his work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste,* Bourdieu examines how dominant cultural institutions and elites wield symbolic power to legitimise certain cultural forms while marginalising others. Applied to folklore preservation, Bourdieu's theory illuminates how institutions, scholars, and policymakers shape hierarchies of value within the folklore canon, privileging certain genres, traditions, and narratives over others based on criteria such as aesthetic appeal, historical significance, or political expediency.

Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" also offers insights into the politics of folklore preservation at the national level. **In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,* Anderson explores how nations construct cohesive identities through shared myths, symbols, and narratives. Applied to folklore preservation, Anderson's framework reveals how states selectively promote and preserve folklore that reinforces national cohesion and identity while neglecting or suppressing narratives that challenge dominant narratives or threaten social cohesion.**

Additionally, Michel de Certeau's notion of "tactics" and "strategies" provides a lens for analysing grassroots efforts to preserve marginalised or subaltern folklore. **In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau argues that subordinate groups employ tactical manoeuvres to subvert and resist dominant power structures. Applied to folklore preservation, de Certeau's framework highlights how marginalised communities engage in grassroots initiatives to document, transmit, and safeguard their cultural heritage, often in opposition to state-sanctioned preservation efforts that prioritise hegemonic narratives or elite cultural forms.**

Jawaharlal Handoo in his key work, *Folklore and Nation Building: A Postcolonial Perspective*, argues that folklore is integral to the construction of national consciousness, especially in postcolonial India. He emphasised how regional traditions, oral histories, alternative indigenous histories and performative arts shape a shared identity that resists colonial narratives. He discusses the role of folklore in resisting cultural homogenisation and promoting pluralistic nationalism.

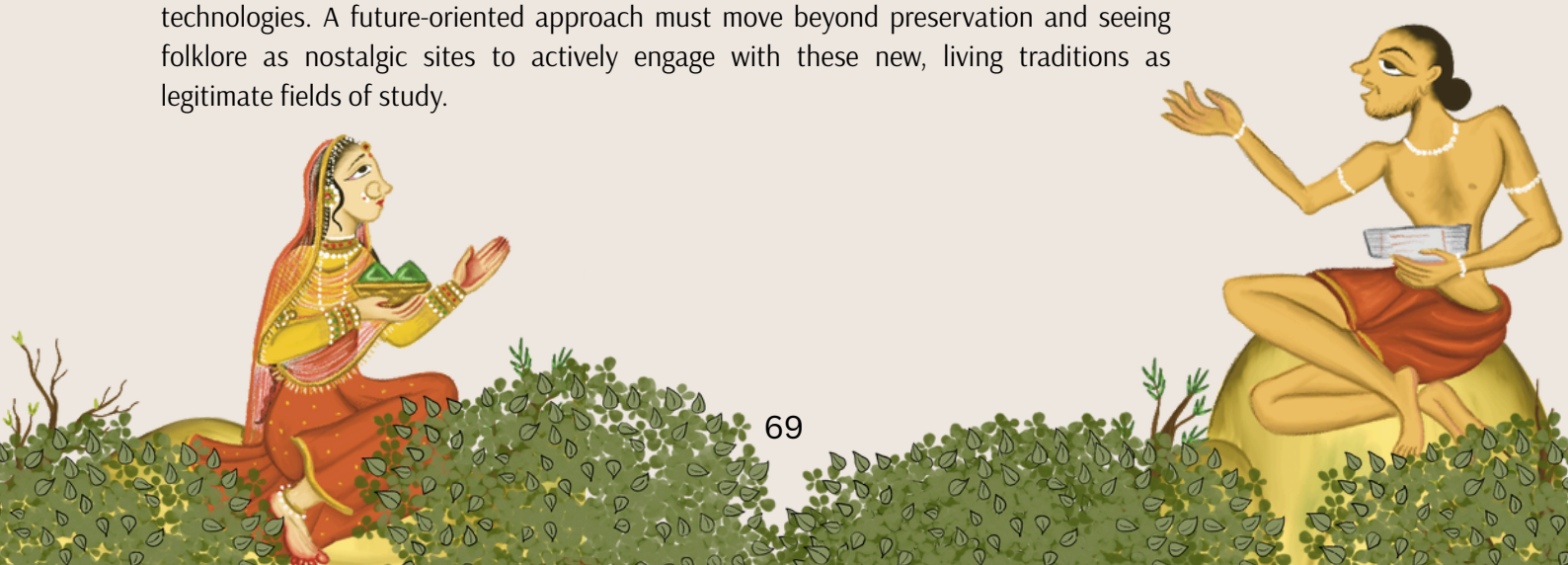
Works by sociologists and influential scholars also offer insights into the politics of folklore translation and preservation, shedding light on the power dynamics, cultural hierarchies, and resistance strategies that shape these processes. By engaging with these theoretical frameworks, we can critically analyse the complexities of folklore preservation and advocate for more inclusive approaches that amplify marginalised voices and challenge dominant narratives.

CRITICAL REVIEW AND GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

This compendium has traced the evolution of folklore studies, mapped various preservation models, and critically examined the politics of representation and translation. While comprehensive, this survey also reveals several critical gaps in the existing scholarship and preservation practices that a contemporary folklore initiative must address.

The Urban and the Contemporary

The literature, as reviewed, focuses extensively on rural, tribal, and traditional folklore, often framed by the "devolutionary premise" that Alan Dundes critiqued is the idea that folklore is a vanishing remnant or a relic of the past. While scholars like Jawaharlal Handoo and A.K. Ramanujan call for attention to modern and contemporary forms, there remains a significant gap in the systematic study of urban and digital-native folklore. The current discourse prioritises using digital tools to preserve traditional forms rather than analysing the new folkloric expressions, from memes and online legends to the lore of specific urban subcultures, that are emerging through these technologies. A future-oriented approach must move beyond preservation and seeing folklore as nostalgic sites to actively engage with these new, living traditions as legitimate fields of study.



The Need for Deeper Intersectional Analysis

In this compendium, we have organised representation along the distinct axes of caste, gender, and class, reflecting a common tendency in the literature to analyse these categories in isolation. However, this approach often fails to capture the compounded nature of identity and marginalisation. There is a critical need for more scholarship that adopts an intersectional lens, examining, for instance, how the folkloric representation of a Dalit woman differs from that of an upper-caste woman or a Dalit man. The works of writers like Bama or Urmila Pawar, who explore these compounded identities, point toward a necessary direction that academic folklore studies must follow more rigorously.

From Preservation to Living Practice

There are numerous models of preservation, from government-led archives to community-based initiatives. Yet, as Barre Toelken notes, a tension exists between folklore as a preserved artefact and as a living, dynamic practice. Much of the institutional focus remains on documentation and archiving, treating folklore as something to be 'frozen' and saved, without a meaningful interaction. A significant gap exists in the literature on methodologies for revitalisation and the re-integration of folklore into contemporary community life. The challenge is not just to save the stories, but to ensure they continue to be told, sung, and adapted, fulfilling the vital social and psychological functions that scholars like William Bascom identified.

Navigating Ethical and Methodological Tensions

There exists the ethical turn in folklore and oral history, explored in the work of scholars like Donald Ritchie and M. D. Muthukumaraswamy who advocates for community rights and informed consent. However, a gap remains in the literature addressing the inherent tensions that arise when academic or institutional goals conflict with community protocols. There is insufficient guidance on navigating situations where a community may wish for certain narratives to remain private or where the act of documentation itself alters the tradition. Future scholarship must develop more robust frameworks for truly collaborative, non-extractive research that prioritises the cultural sovereignty of the communities, moving beyond the legacy of colonial-era collection critiqued by scholars like Sadhana Naithani.

CONCLUSION

This compendium confirms that folklore is far more than a collection of archaic tales; it is a dynamic and contested field where culture is produced, and power is both reinforced and resisted. From its genesis as a scholarly discipline to its contemporary digital forms, the study and preservation of folklore have been shaped by the prevailing political, social, economic, and technological forces of the day. The journey from the antiquarian collections of the 18th century to the postcolonial critiques of the 21st reveals a discipline increasingly aware of its own political and ethical responsibilities.

The analysis of preservation models shows a global shift from top-down, extractive practices, often rooted in a colonial gaze that exoticised or decontextualised traditions, towards more community-centred, rights-based approaches. However, significant barriers persist, including inadequate legal protections for collective intellectual property, the homogenising pressures of globalisation, and the digital divide that risks creating a new hierarchy of cultural memory.

Furthermore, an examination of representation within Indian folklore reveals it to be a critical arena for understanding societal structures. It is a space where the paradoxical reverence for divine female power coexists with the narrative subordination of mortal women; where caste and class hierarchies are both legitimised and subversively challenged; and where fluid, indigenous conceptions of gender have been historically suppressed but continue to endure. Folklore is thus an archive not of consensus, but of conflict and negotiation.

For the Centre for Contemporary Folklore, these findings provide a clear mandate. The work ahead cannot be limited to passive preservation. It must be an active and critical engagement with the gaps identified in this review. It requires:

An intersectional approach that recognises and amplifies the voices of those at the crossroads of multiple marginalisations.

A contemporary focus that embraces both the traditional and the urban/digital folklore as vital, living traditions worthy of study.

A commitment to revitalisation over mere archiving, developing methodologies that support the continued practice and evolution of folklore within communities.

An unwavering ethical framework that prioritises collaboration, consent, and the cultural sovereignty of the communities whose stories are being told.

Ultimately, the task is to radically reimagine folklore preservation as a collaborative, decolonised, ethical, respectful and evolving process. By doing so, we can help ensure that folklore continues to serve its most vital function: reflecting the full, complex, and diverse spectrum of human experience for generations to come.

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