

Preserving Tribal Knowledge through Oral Literature: Language and Cultural Memory in Madhya Pradesh.

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Abstract

Tribal communities hold many kinds of knowledge. They pass it on through stories told by elders. They also use songs, myths, and legends. Proverbs, riddles, and ritual acts matter too. Ecological know-how is shared in daily practices. Children learn through ongoing talks within families.

In Madhya Pradesh, many Adivasi groups live across different landscapes. Gond, Bhil, Bhilala, Baiga, Korku, Sahariya, Kol, and others are present. Their regions differ in ecology and culture. Even so, oral literature plays a key role. It helps people hold on to shared memory. It also supports social rules and local ecological understanding. It keeps a sense of history alive. It shapes community identity as well.

This paper looks at oral literature as something that is still working. It is not only a record stored in books. It is a living place where Adivasi knowledge remains active. The focus is on how language, cultural memory, and knowledge travel from one person to another. The paper warns against treating oral traditions as if they are only “folklore.” They are more than pleasing cultural items. They are knowledge systems that guide how communities read their surroundings. They help people keep social ties. They allow communities to remember past events. They also carry moral and ecological values from one generation to the next.

Census figures point to many languages within Madhya Pradesh’s Scheduled Tribe communities. Forms and speech varieties include Bhili or Bhilodi, Gondi, Korku, Halabi, and several others.

This work uses a qualitative method. It also takes an interdisciplinary stance. It draws on work in indigenous knowledge studies, oral literature studies, ideas from cultural memory theory, and research in language studies.

Keywords: Adivasi knowledge, oral literature, Madhya Pradesh, indigenous languages, cultural memory, Gond, Bhil, Korku, folklore, knowledge preservation.

1. Introduction

Knowledge is not found only in books, manuscripts, archives, schools, and other formal records. Many Indigenous and Adivasi communities hold knowledge in daily life. You can see it in stories told by elders, songs, rituals, careful looks at local nature, sayings, myths, family lines, and community events.

In these communities, knowledge usually moves through being with people and talking across generations. It is not mainly passed through written institutions. Because of this, oral literature does more than entertain. It also acts like a shared store of experience. It helps a community recall its past, make sense of events, and keep its way of life going.

Language variety is not only about numbers. It also shapes culture. People use words to carry what they know. A proverb, a ritual song, a folktale, a myth, or even an account of nature gains its sense in the words people use. The view of life behind those words matters too.

So when an indigenous language fades, something can be lost along with it. The knowledge stored in that language may not move to the next generation in the same way.

The main point is this: Adivasi oral stories work like a living record. But they are not like a fixed museum file. The stories keep going because people sing, speak, and rework them again and again. Each telling can shift the details and its sense. So keeping these works safe is not only about writing them down. It also means keeping the language and the local cultural life that helps the stories make sense.

This work studies Adivasi oral stories and how they help keep knowledge going. It pays attention to Madhya Pradesh and the way spoken tales link up with local indigenous languages. It also looks at cultural memory and what people carry from the past.

The study does not say that oral literature is a “lesser” version of books. It treats spoken traditions as a full cultural system on their own. It then asks how these stories gain authority in daily life. It looks at how people store them in their memory. It also follows how the tales pass from one person to the next across time.

The Oral Tradition and Tribal Knowledge

“Knowledge system” makes many people think of school and textbooks. It also brings to mind formal lesson plans. That idea can hide other kinds of learning that start in the body. It can also ignore what people pass by talk and practice.

Adivasi knowledge does not sit in one neat box. It shows up across many parts of life. You can see it in places like these.

- ecology
- farming
- plants and healing
- weather and seasons
- animals and forest life

- kinship and community life
- ritual practice
- old memories of the past
- moral rules and shared values
- community laws and everyday customs
- songs and other art forms

Walter J. Ong made a useful point about oral and literate cultures. In oral settings, people rely on memory. They also use repetition and delivery. Learning happens during performance and with others. In this kind of tradition, knowledge is not kept as a fixed text in a place like a book. Instead, people bring it back through talk and shared moments. So storytelling helps keep culture alive.

Jack Goody also looked at how speaking and writing shape knowledge. He showed that the way people communicate changes how ideas are set out and how they pass from one person to another. Because of this, oral traditions should not be seen as weaker copies of written works. Oral traditions are their own way of making and carrying knowledge.

None of these parts works alone. They appear in the same everyday spaces. People carry links across them. A story may lead into song. A song may fit with a ritual act. Myths and repeated practices help the rest stay alive.

A spoken story can serve more than one purpose. It can pass on how people see land and nature. It can also tell others what conduct is okay. Sometimes it explains how a ritual started. It can also keep old words that elders used to recall. For that reason, the “literary” and “knowledge” sides do not always get separated in Adivasi oral traditions.

There is also another problem with common ranking. Written works often get placed under “literary.” Oral traditions often get pushed into “folklore.” That divide does not match well. It tends to put reading and writing above other signs of skill. Adivasi oral literature shows a different point. Communities can form steady memory work and knowledge without relying on written texts as the main support.

2. Madhya Pradesh: Linguistic and Cultural Context

Madhya Pradesh is a key place to study Adivasi spoken traditions. Many tribal groups live there side by side. Different language traditions also overlap in the same areas.

The Census of India lists several Scheduled Tribe groups in Madhya Pradesh. These include Gond, Bhil, Baiga, Korku, Kol, and others. The ST-15 dataset shows mother tongue details by tribe. It also notes Bhili or Bhilodi, Gondi, and Korku as languages tied to Scheduled Tribe people.

Even with these records, the language picture is not simple. A tribal person might speak an indigenous language at home as a first language. At the same time, they may use Hindi or another regional language

in schools and for work. They may also use these languages for local administration and for broader contact.

The ST-16 dataset adds more detail on this second layer. It covers subsidiary language use among Scheduled Tribes in Madhya Pradesh. It lists Hindi, Gondi, Bhili or Bhilodi, Korku, and other languages too.

This mix has more than one effect. One part can help people connect with wider society. It can also support public participation. Another part can slowly change daily speech. If indigenous languages are used less at home, some cultural forms may be passed on less over time.

Because of that, keeping languages matters for oral literature. Protecting oral literature also means protecting the languages behind it.

Thus, language preservation is inseparable from the preservation of oral literature.

3. Oral Literature as a Living Archive

An elder's story can feel heavy with years. In that sense, it can act like a common record. A ritual song can help cultural knowledge stay clear. Even a small proverb can carry habits picked up over many seasons. A myth can also show how a group thinks about land, water, plants, and the place they hold. People often picture an archive as paper and ink. They imagine letters, manuscripts, books, and museum shelves. But this picture does not match Adivasi oral life. Memory there is not just kept away. It sits in people. It shows up in how they act in public. Because of that, an oral archive works in a different way than a written one. It has a few traits that stand out.

First, it depends on performance. Meaning appears when someone speaks a tale, sings a song, or takes part in a ritual.

Second, it passes from one age to the next. Elders, parents, children, and nearby neighbors share it through everyday relationships. They do not rely only on texts.

Third, it shifts with the moment. An oral account can change with the setting. It can vary with who speaks. It can also vary with who is listening. These changes do not always mean the tradition is failing. Often they show the tradition is still useful and alive.

Maurice Halbwachs helps here with the idea of collective memory. Memory is not only inside one person. Social groups shape it. Shared ideas guide it. Adivasi oral literature shows this side. Stories, songs, and rituals hold experiences for the whole community. They are not only tied to one speaker.

This way of seeing matters for research on Adivasi communities. Cultural memory can stay strong when events repeat. It does not always need fixed written records.

4. Oral Literature, Ecology and Sustainable Knowledge

Adivasi oral stories can help us see how people think about the land. In many Gond traditions, that bond comes through in a direct way. Trees, rivers, spirits, songs, dances, and rites show up side by side in the tales. The IGNCA also notes how these cultural forms link to the natural world.

These traditions also help keep useful knowledge going. People speak of plants, shifts in seasons, farming routines, animals, and life inside the forest.

Even so, we should be cautious with how the word “sustainability” is used now. It is not right to paint Adivasi communities as if they are always untouched by harm, or as if nothing changes. Their ways have altered over time. New markets, state rules, travel, new tools, and broader environmental shifts have all played a role.

So the key research step is to study specific knowledge practices in detail. Then we can consider what those practices might mean for current debates on sustainability.

Oral literature can back this up. Many ecological details are woven into the stories. They do not come as plain scientific statements laid out like a report. Adivasi oral stories are under strain right now.

5. Language Loss, Modernisation and Cultural Discontinuity

People who care about them see the same hurdles often. One issue is language shift.

A lot of younger speakers lean on big languages because school and work use them. Another issue is movement of families. When people relocate, ties between elders and young listeners can thin out. Elders carry deep cultural detail, yet it may not be passed along as it once was. Schools can also add pressure. In some areas, indigenous languages get limited time in normal classes.

There is also the problem of turning culture into a product. Some stories and art get taken from their own communities. After that, they are shared or sold, and credit is sometimes missing.

On top of that, digitisation can be uneven. Recordings may be made, but the full sense and context behind the story can fade. So the main point is this. Preserving oral life means more than saving words in a document or a digital file. Oral traditions in Madhya Pradesh keep older memories alive. They also hold local skills that families use in daily life. In Gond, Bhil, and Korku communities, elders and other people pass along tales. They speak chants and take part in rites. Words move from one person to another. Older listeners pass what they know to the next set of listeners. This way, each age can learn from what came before. It also helps many households feel they belong to one shared group.

6. Conclusion

The material here points to a tight bond between oral tales and language. Indigenous tongues shape how people speak about land, work, and life. These languages help people talk about past days. They also help name villages, rivers, and other places. People use them to say who is linked to whom. Along with that,

the speech carries beliefs that the community shares. Because of this, saving oral literature is not only about putting stories into Hindi or English. It also means keeping the original way of speaking. It means keeping the places where people still practice these customs.

The study adds another key point. Protection does not need to stop change. Spoken forms shift over time. Those shifts can help keep the tradition useful. Even when words and ways of phrasing alter, a cultural thread can still hold on.

For Madhya Pradesh, the next actions should connect. First, document indigenous languages. Local groups should be able to keep their own materials. Community archives need support so people can store and share what they have. Elders should have space to speak with youth. Schools and other community settings should also include this learning. If digital tools are used, they should be handled with care. People who hold knowledge in Adivasi communities must be respected. They should be part of the work, not left out.

In the end, safeguarding Adivasi knowledge safeguards the people. It honors their voices and their languages. It keeps memories and ties within the community. Those ties let the knowledge be shared again and again.

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