

Original Article

PRESERVING CULTURAL IDENTITY THROUGH PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION: A STUDY OF ODISHA'S BHAGABATA TUNGIS

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ABSTRACT

India's storytelling traditions are indeed a treasure trove of cultural wealth, exemplifying the profound role of narratives in preserving and transmitting knowledge. These traditions connect the present to the collective wisdom of the past, highlighting the intrinsic relationship between art, spirituality, and community in the Indian ethos. The Bhagabata Tungi of Odisha enriches India's storytelling legacy, serving as a community space for reciting the Odia Bhagabata authored by Atibadi Jagannath Das and promoting knowledge sharing. These Tungis embody participatory storytelling, enabling interactive learning and preserving cultural identity. Similar to other Indian traditions, such as the Ramayana or Panchatantra, Tungis transfer spiritual and moral values across generations. Unique to Tungis is their localised adaptation, blending philosophical teachings with practical life lessons relevant to the community. This echoes India's broader oral traditions, including tribal narratives and acts as a vital tool for cultural preservation. Bhagabata Tungis exemplify the transformative power of storytelling in fostering unity and shared values. This study highlights the importance of Bhagabata Tungi in preserving cultural identity and fostering intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Drawing parallels between traditional Tungis practices and modern communication frameworks, this study demonstrates the relevance of participatory communication and interactive learning models. This paper concludes by emphasising the need to preserve and revitalise Bhagabata Tungi traditions to maintain their relevance in contemporary society while providing insights into integrating oral storytelling practices into modern educational and communication methodologies.

Keywords: Bhagabata Tungi, Oral Traditions, Knowledge Transmission, Participatory Storytelling, Cultural Preservation

INTRODUCTION

Oral tradition and storytelling have always been a cornerstone of human culture, serving to preserve histories, teach moral values, and nurture communal connections. India's oral tradition and storytelling traditions are indeed a treasure trove of cultural wealth, exemplifying the profound role of narratives in preserving and transmitting knowledge Chandra (2019). These traditions serve as bridges connecting the present to the collective wisdom of the past, highlighting the intrinsic relationship between art, spirituality, and community in the Indian ethos Wilson (2015).

One such vibrant tradition is the Bhagabata Tungi of Odisha, an institution that uniquely blends spirituality, artistry, and community involvement. These humble village spaces are dedicated to the recitation and discussion of the Odia Bhagabata, written by the revered Atibadi Jagannath Das. Historically, these Tungis have facilitated the oral transmission of knowledge, bridging the gap between generations and linking past narratives to contemporary realities. The origins of Bhagabata Tungis can be traced back to

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the 16th century, when Atibadi Jagannath Das composed the Odia Bhagabata [Mohanty \(1990\)](#). At a time when Sanskrit was the predominant medium for religious texts, Das democratised spiritual knowledge by rendering it in Odia, the vernacular language. This inclusivity not only bridged the gap between the learned elite and the common people but also laid the foundation for the establishment of Tungis as centres of communal learning [Acharya \(2016\)](#).

Bhagabata Tungis are distinct in their localised approach to storytelling. Unlike other traditions that cater to broader audiences, Tungis are deeply rooted in the socio-cultural fabric of Odisha's villages. These spaces enable the recitation and interpretation of the Odia Bhagabata, a scripture that simplifies complex theological concepts into everyday language. What sets Tungis apart is its adaptability; it seamlessly blends philosophical teachings with practical advice tailored to the local community's needs.

Bhagabata Tungi represents more than just spaces for spiritual discourse; it is a dynamic platform where oral traditions are kept alive. Through the nightly recitations and discussions of the Odia Bhagabata, members of the community, young and old, gather to engage with teachings that encompass spiritual wisdom, ethical practices, and a shared cultural heritage [Das \(1990\)](#). The participatory nature of these gatherings fosters an interactive environment, making them a living repository of Odisha's cultural identity. Jagannath Das's work played a pivotal role in standardising Odia, with many of its verses becoming proverbs still in use today [Dash \(2024\)](#).

This oral tradition also ensures the democratisation of knowledge, reaching even those who are not formally educated. This study provides critical insights into the cultural and communicative significance of Bhagabata Tungis in Odisha. It establishes Tungis as vital tools for preserving and communicating Odisha's spiritual, moral, and linguistic heritage, acting as bridges that connect generations through participatory storytelling [Majhi et al. \(2024\)](#). The study underscores the transformative potential of dialogic and participatory frameworks.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Culture is a dynamic tapestry woven from the threads of shared experiences, beliefs, and practices that have been passed down through generations. In the context of Odisha, one such thread is the institution of Bhagabata Tungi, a traditional village gathering space where the Shrimad Bhagabata, a revered Odia literary and spiritual text, is recited and discussed.

The Odia Bhagabata is a significant text in Odia literature, written in the vernacular to make spiritual teachings comprehensible to the common folk. Bhagabata Tungis functioned as participatory platforms where philosophical teachings were localised and adapted to the practical concerns of rural communities. Over time, these Tungis became essential for fostering intergenerational learning, preserving cultural identity, and promoting shared values.

By the 19th and 20th centuries, Bhagabata Tungis had become integral to village life, with villagers, irrespective of age or literacy, converging in the evenings to hear recitations. The oral tradition of these gatherings standardised the Odia language and embedded its verses into everyday speech, many of which persist as proverbs today. This historical role highlights the Tungi's function as a repository of collective memory and a medium for cultural continuity.

This study brings a fresh perspective by focusing on the relatively undocumented Bhagabata Tungis of Odisha, offering unique insights into their cultural and communicative significance. While much has been written about India's larger storytelling traditions, such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, the Bhagabata Tungis remain an underexplored treasure. This research emphasises the localised and participatory nature of Tungi practices. From a communication standpoint, the study highlights the dynamic, dialogic essence of Tungis. Moreover, the study explores how Tungis act as cultural repositories, safeguarding Odisha's unique heritage amid rapid globalisation and digitalisation.

The originality of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach, which bridges traditional storytelling, cultural preservation, and contemporary communication methodologies, thereby making significant contributions to both academic discourse and practical applications for cultural sustainability.

MOTIVATION

This research is motivated by a desire to underscore the invaluable role of Bhagabata Tungis in fostering intergenerational learning, cultural preservation, and participatory communication. By investigating the communication aspects of Bhagabata Tungis, this study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on how storytelling can serve as a medium for empowerment, education, and community development.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 1) To analyse the role of oral traditions in knowledge transmission through Bhagabata Tungis.
- 2) To investigate the communicative dynamics within Bhagabata Tungis.
- 3) To explore the relevance of Bhagabata Tungis in modern communication frameworks.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) How does the Bhagabata Tungi function as a platform for oral traditions and storytelling?
- 2) In what ways does it contribute to knowledge transmission and communication within Odia culture?
- 3) What is the relevance of Bhagabata Tungs in modern communication frameworks?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Oral traditions have been a foundation of cultural preservation and knowledge dissemination across human civilisations. They represent a mode of communication that predates written texts, a dynamic process of sharing history, wisdom, and values. In Odisha, India, the Bhagabata Tungi stands as a critical example of how oral traditions have functioned as a mechanism for fostering community dialogue and cultural continuity [Wilson \(2015\)](#).

In India, this tradition is particularly vivid, manifesting in rich tapestries of epics, folktales, and oral practices. India's storytelling traditions are invaluable cultural assets, intertwining art, spirituality, and community. Oral epics, such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana, are profound repositories of history, ethics, and philosophy. Diverse forms such as Kathakalakshepam, Pandavani, and shadow puppetry (Tholu Bommalata) keep these narratives vibrant. Stories often blend spirituality and creativity, as seen in the works of Bhakti poets and devotional performances like Rasa Lila. Folk traditions, ranging from Baul songs to Gond art, reflect India's diverse regional and collective identities. These traditions foster unity during festivals and communal gatherings [Joshi \(2017\)](#).

The Bhagabata Tungi emerges as a localised manifestation of this tradition. Originating in Odisha, these spaces were established to recite the Odia Bhagabata, a 16th-century vernacular adaptation of the Sanskrit Bhagavata Purana by Atibadi Jagannath Das [Dash \(2022\)](#). Unlike its Sanskrit predecessor, the Odia Bhagabata is accessible to the masses, blending philosophical teachings with relatable lessons. Tungs historically served as village hubs, fostering social cohesion and moral education.

Comparative studies highlight the role of oral tradition in cultural preservation. Tribal narratives encode ecological knowledge [Priyadarshini and Abhilash \(2019\)](#), while the Ramayana imparts ethical principles [Ramanujan \(1991\)](#). The Bhagabata Tungi shares these functions but stands out for its structured, community-driven format [Das \(2015\)](#). In the past, 'Bhagabata Tungi' was the life or nerve centre of rural life, which could be described as the village school, library, judicial court, public relations, and a hub for religious discourse [Orissa Reference Annual \(2004\)](#).

RESEARCH GAPS

The literature review addresses significant gaps in understanding the cultural and communicative roles of Bhagabata Tungs in Odisha. While India's oral storytelling traditions are well-documented, specific research on Tungs remains scarce. Most studies overlook their localised adaptations, where spiritual teachings are contextualised for rural communities. Additionally, limited attention has been given to comparing Tungs with other storytelling traditions, such as tribal narratives or pan-Indian epics like the Ramayana, to highlight their unique participatory approach.

From a communication perspective, the dialogic and community-driven nature of Tungs has not been thoroughly explored. Few studies link these practices to modern participatory communication frameworks or interactive learning models. Furthermore, there is inadequate research on integrating Tungi practices into formal education or using digital platforms to revitalise them. By addressing these gaps, this study provides fresh insights into the cultural, educational, and communicative significance of Bhagabata Tungs, ensuring their relevance in contemporary contexts.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, relying on secondary data analysis to investigate the communicational significance of Bhagabata Tungs. Secondary sources include academic articles, historical accounts, and cultural studies related to Odisha's oral traditions and the Odia Bhagabata. Content analysis was employed to identify patterns such as cultural preservation and knowledge transmission.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

BHAGABATA TUNGI AS A COMMUNICATION HUB

The Bhagabata Tungi functions as a traditional communication centre where the teachings of the Odia Bhagabata are disseminated through oral storytelling. These spaces serve as a platform for participatory dialogue, enabling villagers to collectively engage with spiritual and moral lessons [Panigrahi \(2018\)](#).

The Bhagabata Tungi was more than a site of passive listening; it was a communicative space that strengthened communities. The act of gathering often in the evenings after daily labour created a rhythm of social interaction, where narratives served as a

catalyst for dialogue. Villagers debated interpretations, asked questions, and related the Bhagabata's lessons to their lives, fostering a participatory culture.

The participatory nature of Tungis aligns with Freire (1970) concept of dialogical action, where knowledge is co-created through interaction between the storyteller and the audience. This contrasts with one-way communication, as villagers actively interpret and contextualise the narratives to suit their personal and community realities.

Moreover, Tungis embody a blend of interpersonal and group communication. The storyteller conveys messages not only to individuals but also to an assembled group, creating a shared understanding that fosters both personal introspection and collective unity. This interactive model situates the Bhagabata Tungi as an organic precursor to modern participatory communication methods.

ORAL STORYTELLING AS A MODE OF KNOWLEDGE PRESERVATION:

The oral tradition in Bhagabata Tungis exemplifies the resilience of pre-literate methods of knowledge preservation. Ong (1982) highlights the concept of primary orality, which underscores the importance of oral traditions in cultures where written language is secondary or unavailable. The Bhagabata Tungi tradition reflects this, as the Odia Bhagabata is recited, memorised, and interpreted, ensuring its transmission across generations. Scholars like Mamang Dai, in the context of Indian tribal narratives, argue that such oral traditions safeguard a community's "valuable tales" against erasure Dai (2014). Similarly, the Bhagabata Tungi preserved Odisha's spiritual and linguistic heritage, embedding it within the fabric of rural life. The interactive discussions that followed recitations allowed villagers to interpret narratives in light of their lived experiences, making culture a living, evolving entity rather than a static relic.

Through the Odia Bhagabata, Tungis preserve spiritual teachings intertwined with practical ethical lessons. For example, the stories of Lord Krishna and other mythological narratives are adapted to instil virtues such as truthfulness, compassion, and social responsibility. Dash (2024) emphasises that this process is not merely about rote learning but involves the audience internalising the values presented in the stories.

SOCIAL COHESION AND COMMUNITY BONDING

Bhagabata Tungis play a vital role in fostering social cohesion by bringing people together in shared cultural practices. These gatherings transcend social and economic barriers, creating an inclusive space where collective learning takes precedence Acharya (2024). This aligns with Habermas (1984) idea of communicative action, where mutual understanding and shared values are developed through dialogue. By engaging in collective storytelling, participants reinforce their cultural identity and moral frameworks.

The interactive storytelling sessions often serve secondary functions, such as conflict resolution, socialising, and collective decision-making. This demonstrates how the Bhagabata Tungi is not only a spiritual hub but also a social institution that integrates practical aspects of communal living.

The Tungi also facilitated the exchange of practical knowledge. As community hubs, they were spaces where elders shared insights on health, morality, and social conduct, intertwining spiritual lessons with everyday wisdom.

The Tungi bridged social divides. Men and women, young and old, literate and illiterate—all participated, albeit with varying roles. This inclusivity reinforced communal harmony, a value central to Odia culture. The oral medium, with its immediacy and accessibility, ensured that communication transcended barriers, making the Tungi a microcosm of Odisha's collective ethos.

CULTURAL CONTINUITY AND PERFORMATIVE DIMENSIONS

The narratives shared in Bhagabata Tungis contribute significantly to the cultural continuity of Odisha. Performative elements, such as voice modulation, rhythmic recitations, and gestures, make the stories more engaging and memorable. These performances often draw from and influence other Odia art forms, such as Pala and Daskathia, which utilise music and drama to narrate similar themes.

Such performative storytelling reflects McLuhan's (1964) concept of the medium as the message, where the manner in which stories are told becomes as significant as their content. The Bhagabata Tungi tradition demonstrates the power of performance to enhance the retention and impact of oral narratives.

CONCLUSION

The Bhagabata Tungis of Odisha stand as profound examples of the power of participatory storytelling in fostering community cohesion, intergenerational learning, and cultural preservation. These traditional spaces, rooted in the recitation and discussion of Atibadi Jagannath Das's Odia Bhagabata, embody a unique blend of spirituality, moral instruction, and localised relevance. Through

their dialogic and interactive nature, Tungis serve as living repositories of Odisha's rich heritage, transcending mere storytelling to become platforms for meaningful communication and shared values.

This study underscores the vital role of Bhagabata Tungis in preserving linguistic, spiritual, and cultural identities, particularly in an era of rapid globalisation and digital influences. By drawing parallels between Tungi practices and modern participatory communication frameworks, it highlights their enduring relevance and transformative potential in contemporary contexts. The ability of Tungis to adapt timeless philosophical teachings to address practical community concerns sets them apart as an invaluable model for participatory learning and community engagement.

At the same time, the challenges faced by Tungis in the modern world necessitate urgent attention. Urbanisation, generational disengagement, and digital distractions pose significant threats to their survival. This research advocates for the preservation and revitalisation of Bhagabata Tungis through innovative approaches, such as their integration into formal education systems and digital platforms, to ensure their sustainability.

In conclusion, Bhagabata Tungis are not relics of the past but enduring symbols of cultural resilience and collective wisdom. By bridging tradition with contemporary relevance, these Tungis underscore the timeless power of stories in shaping human understanding and experience. Their principles of participatory storytelling, interactive learning, and localised knowledge remain as relevant today as they were centuries ago. Preserving these traditions is not merely about safeguarding heritage; it is about leveraging their timeless insights to address contemporary challenges, inspire community-driven communication, and shape a more inclusive and culturally rooted future.

These findings have broader implications for preserving similar cultural systems globally, offering a framework for balancing tradition with modernisation. Ultimately, this research aims to inspire future studies and practical measures to safeguard these cultural treasures for future generations.

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