

# Orature and New Media: Reviving Oral Traditions in the Digital Age

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**Abstract:** *Orature or oral literature and oral traditions become a significant source of information for construction of the history of a place. The Barak valley region of Northeast India owns such a vast heritage of oral folk traditions and oral literature. These oral sources exist in the folklore, folk tales, curative chants, ritual texts, folk songs and musical genres, myths, spells, proverbs, word games, legends and historical narratives that survive in the memories of the people of Barak valley. However, lack of documentation, as well as a dearth of public awareness is turning out to be a threat to the cultural sustainability of these oral traditions and oral narratives. The oral literature, which forms a part of our history, thus need to be documented in a popular paradigm and effectively utilized to disseminate the folk art and culture of the region. New media and digital technologies have made varied cultures across the world more visible, vocal and global. In today's mediatized society, cyberspace provides a huge scope to document the vibrant culture and folk arts, bringing them into the realm of public knowledge. Oral cultural heritage, if propagated through the virtual new media, possess the potential to make people culturally aware of their past traditions. In a region much underrepresented in the mainstream national media, documentation in the contemporary new media will make a significant contribution to evoke consciousness among the masses. Further, documenting and popularizing the rich cultural heritage in virtual forms will ensure its sustainability and continuous transmission from one generation to the next.*

**Keywords:** *Documentation, Digital Age, New Media, Orature, Oral Traditions, Oral Literature, Oral Narratives.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Jan Vansina in his work "Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology" defined oral traditions as reported statements which are specifically about the past (Vansina, 1965). They are the cultural items transmitted by word of mouth for generations. Each society has its own oral culture and traditions through which they express their attitudes and cultural life. Oral tradition, reflecting the traditional society, remains the basis of studying the culture of the people of a particular place which helps in understanding the culture and society. These are collective and community forms (Dos, 2010), that are heard, retained and recalled at the moment of transmission. Folklore, folk tales, folk drama, folk medicines, curative chants, folk songs, musical genres, myths, grandma's stories, lullabies, proverbs, word games, historical narratives all forms the oral traditions and oral literature.

Oral tradition and oral literature have always been the most accepted and widespread mode of human communication to spread knowledge and history in societies where traditions are imparted more through speech than writing (Turin, Wheeler, & Wilkinson, 2013). No one in the field of communication can ignore the vast potentialities of orality and it is thus, rightly considered to be an effective medium for reaching the masses. Folk music, folk dances, folk tales, myths, and proverbs function as a communication device when employed in the language and accepted melodic patterns of a community. In oral communication, the use of suitable proverbs, sayings, and riddles enlivens and enriches one's language. They are entertaining and can be used during a conversation for desired impact and persuasion.

Today, in spite of the spread of print, electronic and new media, there is a scarcity of documentation of the oral traditions and oral literature. Documentation will allow the orature to reach a wider audience and create awareness regarding the local traditions among the masses. Again, along with creating written records, the digital documentation is also required which can multiply their reach. The present paper tries to explore if new media can be used to document the oral traditions of Barak Valley so as to ensure their sustainable future. In this age of new media, a number of websites, blogs, and YouTube channels are dedicated to document and share information about varied culture and communities in the digital space. This enables people from all over the world to witness the different oral traditions particular to a region or community. The new media and digital media technologies can thus popularize the oral traditions and establish a direct impact on the audience. This paper, therefore, attempts to find out how the cyberspace can contribute towards popularizing the oral traditions and oral literature of Barak valley.

## 2. Oral Traditions and Oral Literature of Barak Valley:

Barak Valley is located in the southern region of Assam. At present, it comprises the three districts of Assam, namely Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. Barak has its own richness in terms of culture and intellectual diversification. It is a region with ethnic, linguistic, religious and socio-cultural diversities where every community has their own heritage of oral cultural traditions, folklore, customs, beliefs, literature, and art. The oral cultural traditions of Barak valley have contributed significantly to enrich the literature and culture of Assam and India as a whole.

The folklore of the region is related to religion, rituals, death, agriculture, dance, drama, song and many more. A resource of the nation's value and culture, the different forms of oral traditions have always existed and lived against all sorts of adversities. *Ojha nritya* (dance performed covering stories of serpent Goddess Manasha), *Ojha gaan* (songs accompanying *Ojha nritya*), *nauka puja* (worship of Goddess Manasha), *dhamail* (a popular folk dance of Barak Valley which has its origin in Sylhet district of Bangladesh), *baro maashyar gaan*, *gajir gaan* (types of folk songs from Barak valley), *rupkotha* (fairy tales), *kichha* (a type of fairy tale from Barak valley) among others include the oral traditions and oral literature of Barak Valley. These forms of cultural expression of the people are performed for generations and act as carriers of social values.

Oral traditions of Barak valley include the whole panorama of folk art, folk customs, folklore, oral literature and so on. The most popular form of oral literature is folk songs. There are pastoral songs, fishermen songs, love and war songs, religious songs, festival songs, seasonal songs and many more. Likewise, the lively folk dances represent different aspects of the people's life which are performed in the communities with everyone's participation. Even today, *Dhamail* songs and dance are performed at times of functions and celebrations. *Ojha nritya* is a religious dance form of Barak Valley. *Ojha nritya* or *Ojapali* (traditional folk dance from Assam) covers the same story but have different contexts in accordance with the valley, region or locality. The 'Manasa Mangal' story is elaborated in these dance forms through poetry and music and in *nauka puja* or boat worship, Goddess Manasha is worshipped.

Enriched with wisdom and knowledge, the folk tales are like a magnum opus. These traditional narratives are narrated by the elder people of the community to the younger generation. Oral literature of the region also includes lullabies, rhymes, riddles, idioms and phrases, proverbs, curative chants, and others, which are the inseparable parts of the community's heritage. Poems and lullabies are the fixed form of traditions that are transmitted orally to the next generation. Numerous proverbs and riddles are still present in the memories of the people of the region which provide them the essence of emotional, moral and cultural sustenance (Choudhury, 2015). Most of these poetic oral compositions are composed in 'Sylheti,' a dialect of the Bengali language. The proverbs are like the moral lessons which are passed on from one generation to another with the intention to spread wisdom, knowledge and universal facts.

The vast oral literature of Barak valley is connected with every aspect of life which further provides knowledge of the past. Oral cultural traditions, reflecting the past play a significant role in constructing the history of a community. They become the indispensable source materials to understand and appreciate the history and culture of an area or tribe objectively and meaningfully. Also, the telling traditions represent what people think about the social environment of their past. Oral sources undoubtedly are truly important in order to add new knowledge to the existing historical writings. Barak valley, like any other region, has its own history. The most significant being the partition history, the oral narratives of migration and settlement. These are ingrained in the memories of the people who have experienced the trauma of partition. These memories serve as important sources of historical records and the oral sources which add to the historical knowledge are the living fossils of the communities. The folklore and folk narratives serve as a chronicle of the past and the communities have preserved them throughout generations by virtue of their wisdom.

## 3. Documenting Oral Traditions in the Digital Age:

Today, due to rapid urbanization, people's culture is undergoing major changes. The vibrant and soulful oral traditions which are distinctive to Assam's Barak valley are fading from the mind space of its own people. The oral narratives are not documented at a deeper level and not much record is available. Hence, the importance of documentation comes in. The oral cultural traditions need to be recorded so that the future generations can also experience the same. If we do not record the vast oral heritage, many things will perish. Also, if we do not preserve the records, these will vanish. Documentation will allow the ideas to be stored and retrieved at any time. Because the knowledge the oral cultural traditions embody is priceless and once lost, cannot be recovered. Documentation and popularization are thus essential to bring the valuable treasures of the region to public knowledge and so that it is available for the people to understand and appreciate.

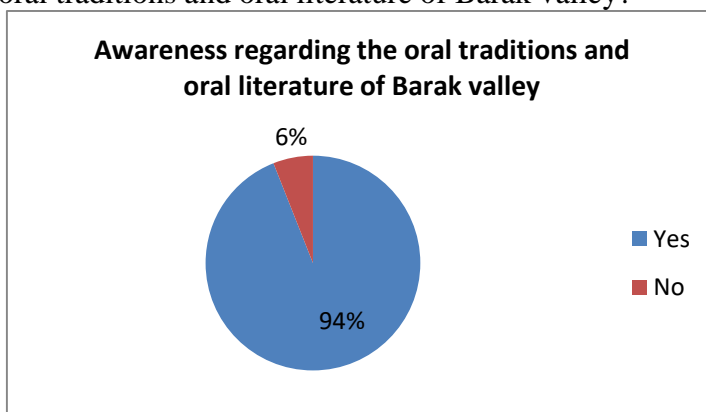
The oral cultural traditions, though not written, are still deeply rooted in oral narratives and are, therefore, shaped by orality (Adegbola, 2012). The evolution and expansion of digital technologies provide new possibilities

to effectively and efficiently document and disseminate these oral narratives. New media transcends the boundaries of space and time. It refers to the interactive digital media technologies including social media like Facebook, Twitter, blogs as well as emails, video games, online communities, online forums and various online outlets where users can create, upload and share content with people all over the world. The digital space creates an environment where the users can exchange knowledge and information about their oral literature. Digital documentation will highly enrich the knowledge gaining and sharing experience. The new media and digital technologies allow easy recording, storing and distribution of ideas, beliefs, thoughts, knowledge, and experiences and also make it easily accessible to the global audience. The community members can record the oral literature and thereafter, upload and share the information in social media which will create awareness and ensure wider appreciation of the local traditions among the masses. This way, the potentialities of this digital age can be fully utilized to bring the rich cultural heritage of the population of Barak valley to the whole of mankind.

The survey conducted hence affirms this. It is evident from the survey that the majority of the people respond positively towards the documentation of oral traditions using digital technologies. The survey is conducted among the people of Barak valley to assess the thoughts and opinions of people towards the usage of digital media in documenting the oral traditions so as to ensure their sustainable future. Purposive sampling was used to yield responses from a total of 100 respondents aged between 18 and 45 who are exposed to new media in their daily lives. They are the ones who can pass on their rich oral traditions to the next generation. The questions included in the survey and the results are graphically represented below.

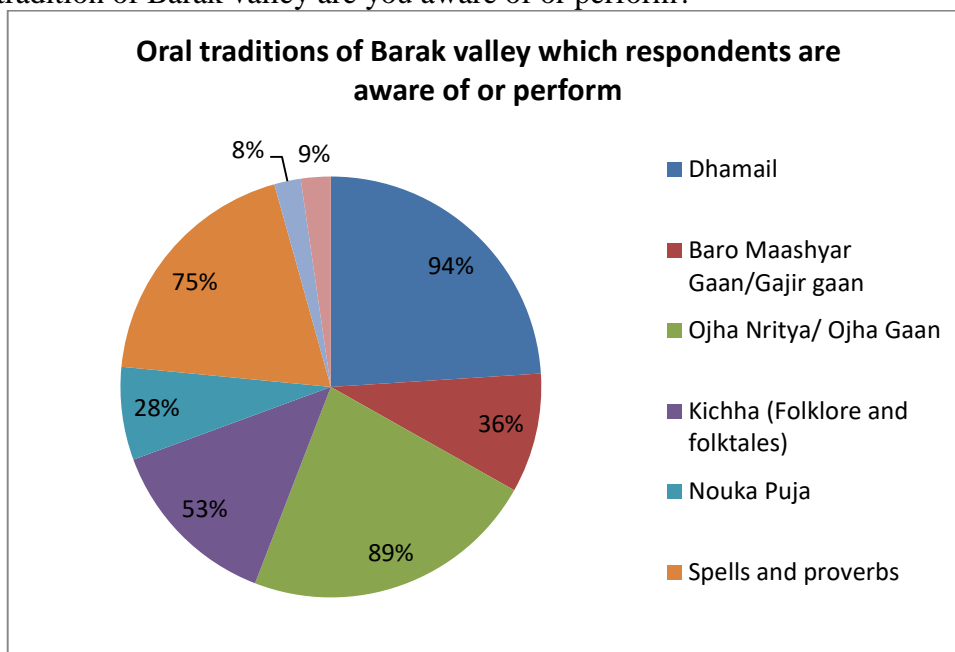
**4. ANALYSIS:**

Q.1 Are you aware of the oral traditions and oral literature of Barak valley?



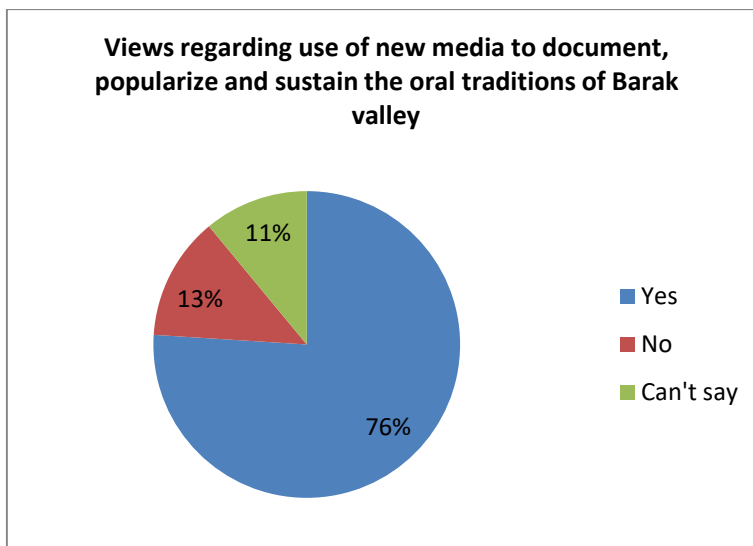
94% of the respondents are aware of the oral traditions and oral literature of Barak valley.

Q.2 Which oral tradition of Barak valley are you aware of or perform?



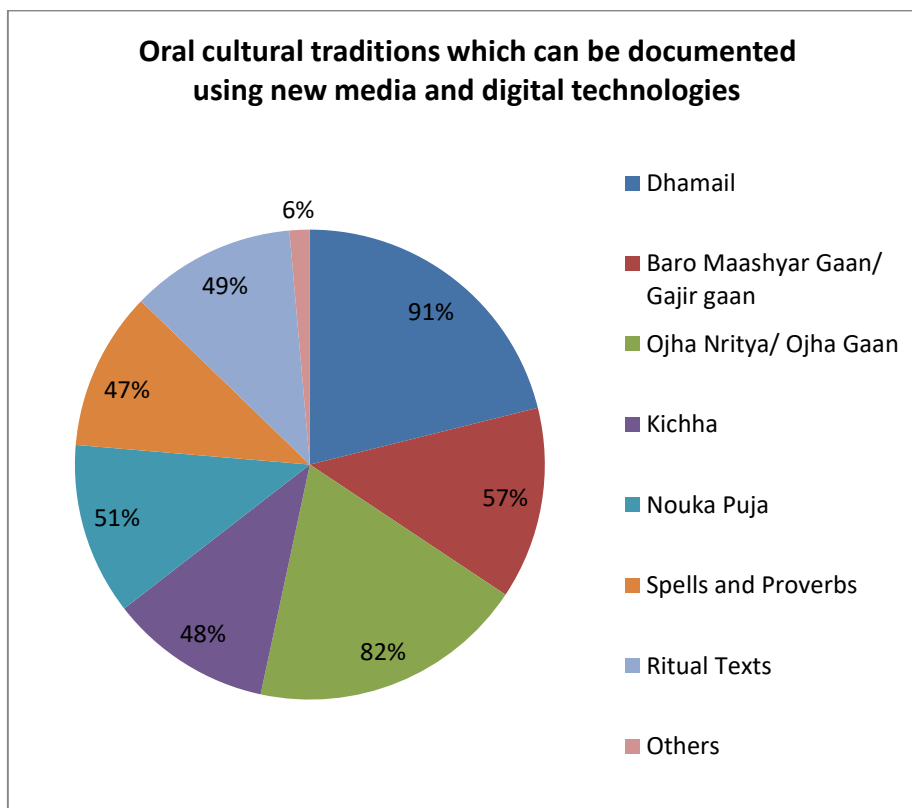
Respondents could select multiple options with respect to the oral traditions they are mostly aware of or perform. Data shows that they are mostly aware of *Dhamail* (94%), *Ojha Nritya/Ojha Gaan* (89%) followed by spells and proverbs (75%), *Kichha* (folklore and folktales) (53%), *Baro Maashyar Gaan/Gajir Gaan* (36%) and *Nouka Puja* (28%).

Q.3. Do you think that the new media can be used to document, popularize and sustain the oral traditions of Barak valley?



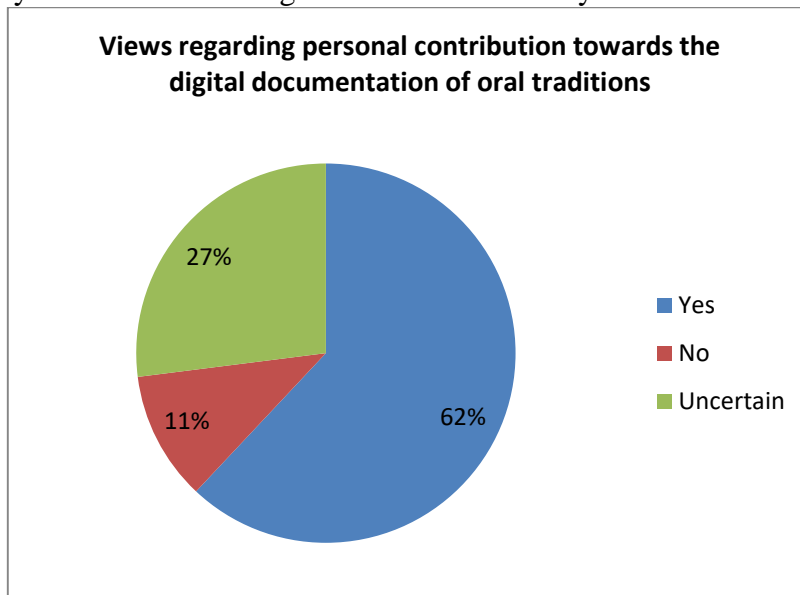
Majority of the respondents (76%) think that the new media can be used to document, popularize and sustain the oral traditions of Barak valley while 13% do not think so.

Q.4. Which oral cultural traditions and oral literature should be documented by new media and digital technologies?



Respondents could select multiple options with respect to their views on which oral cultural traditions and oral literature should be digitally documented. *Dhamail* (91%), *Ojha Nritya/Ojha Gaan* (82%), *Baro maashyar gaan/gajir gaan* (57%) and *Nouka puja* (51%) received the highest responses.

Q.5. Will you personally contribute to the digital documentation of your oral traditions?



A total of 62% respondents said they will contribute towards the digital documentation of our oral traditions while 27% are uncertain regarding this.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The survey reveals that majority of the respondents i.e. 76% think that the new media can be used to document, popularize and sustain the oral traditions of Barak valley but only a total of 62% respondents said they will contribute towards the digital documentation of their oral traditions. In accordance with the Technology Acceptance Model, the reason may be the perceived complexity in the usage of the new media and digital technologies that restrain people. So, a minimum training should be provided to the community people on how to document the indigenous knowledge using the new media and digital media technologies. In this age, the least requirement to record the valuable treasures is that of a smartphone which can record both still and motion pictures. Also, digital audio and video recorders of varied ranges are available nowadays. All these provide new possibilities for recording and documenting the orature.

The hugely positive response indicating the particular oral traditions that the respondents think should be documented in the digital media shows the sentimental attachment people have with their own culture. This makes them want their own traditions to be popularized among the masses through the cyberspace. The reach and convenience of the new media can further increase the effectiveness of the oral literature. Moreover, the online sharing and online availability of the oral literature will garner the attention of scholars and professionals in the academic circle and the general public too. Studies related to the rich cultural heritage of Barak valley, their documentation and popularization, their status and different dimensions in these areas will ensure a deeper understanding and awareness among the people regarding this.

## 6. CONCLUSION:

The oral traditions and oral literature help in establishing communication at a conscious level. The oral sources, which are also significant in writing the history of a region need to be carefully investigated, studied and documented to expose the aesthetic content they carry. As Hussain (2017) says, the psychological attachment of the masses with their oral traditions remains one of the main reasons that it is relevant even in this digital age. This attachment should be retained in order to sustain the oral cultural traditions for the coming generations. For this, the new means of knowledge and information sharing can be effectively utilized to universalize the indigenous knowledge of varied communities. The vibrant, soulful and colourful oral traditions can be digitally documented in the new media and brought into the limelight to showcase the oral traditions and oral literature of the inhabitants of Barak valley. The indigenous knowledge, when recorded and promoted in the popular paradigm, will make it accessible to the present and future generations thus creating awareness among the community people. New media will further popularize the oral literature unique to a particular region or community on a global platform. Illiteracy and digital divide among others may create obstacles at times however the learned masses can definitely contribute to accelerating the process of digital media documentation while diminishing the digital gap (Hussain, 2017). This intersection of oral traditions and new media will ensure a sustainable future for the orature thereby assuring its revival. Briefly, documentation will allow the oral traditions to live, forever.

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