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How This Organisation Is Giving India's Tribal Musicians a New Lease of Life

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The Anahad Foundation aims to break the shackles that have held back tribal folk music.

Folk music is an indelible part of India's storied oral tradition. Songs emanating from the tribal folk tradition are critical fragments of this country's vast cultural diversity. Based on simple instruments and arrangements, articulated by voices of the soil, and set across different geographical locations and cultural

contexts, these songs are a celebration of nature and the human condition.

In an era when music is based on electronically-generated soundscapes, a young social entrepreneur, Abhinav Agrawal (26) started the Anahad Foundation, a not-for-profit organisation that works towards recording, preserving, documenting and consolidating the available knowledge of the evolution of Indian tribal folk music.

The core team behind executing this vision also includes Shuchi Roy, an experienced lawyer dealing with copyright issues and managing the organisation's operations, and Satyam Sangwan, who deals with the technical and post-production process.

Abhinav's personal tryst with music began very early, learning the tabla from the age of four and eventually earning a Prabhakar degree in the instrument, and vocals from the Allahabad Gharana.

He founded the Anahad Foundation in 2013 but soon realised that he didn't have the requisite skills or understanding of how to run such an organisation. He soon enrolled into Berklee College of Music, Valencia, and earned a Master's degree in music business.

Speaking to The Better India, Abhinav says that without avenues for recording, storing and establishing a digital identity for these folk artists, their work continues to suffer from myriad environmental, social and economic factors. He cites rising urbanisation of areas in certain parts of Rajasthan, and the growing sense of detachment it creates among local communities, as a factor that has come to threaten these precious cultural artefacts.

“Without quality technology to record their music, they cannot reach a larger audience and reap the benefits through earning from mechanical royalties,” said Abhinav.

Although the organisation is based out of New Delhi, the foundation and their team of volunteers travel to tribal villages with a mobile studio recording system to record the work of these artists under their 'Project Equals' initiative, which brings tribal folk musical communities into the mainstream. Once the composition is vetted for originality, it is converted into a digital format. The copyright to this composition is then given to the composer.

The Anahad Foundation then aids the process of creating a website for the respective artist, with a music video of their performance uploaded to it.

When asked if the organisation also doubles up as an artist management agency, Abhinav responds with an emphatic no. "There is a host of artist management agencies which take these artists to perform abroad.

However, on their return these are artists are

left in a perilous financial condition. Many of them are illiterate and do not understand contracts. These agencies end up taking 60-70% of all the earnings, leaving the artists with a pittance.”

Instead, what the Anahad Foundation seeks to do is empower artists or someone from their community to take up that responsibility.

“Either the tribal artist or someone from the community possessing a certain amount of literacy is taught to become artist managers in their own right, providing them with CDs, business cards and pen drives. In the event that they do not understand a particular piece of contract or any such document, we help them overcome communication barriers.”

Songs produced by these folk artists are released on CDs and digital platforms across the world with royalties generated through

streaming and selling for documentation purposes. In fact, music scholars from all over the world are invited to study this music for the documentation process. This, Abhinav argues, is the difference between folk and classical music. “Classical music continues to thrive in India because it is well documented and preserved. Students today earn degrees in classical music, and scholars continue to produce academic papers on the subject.”

Collaborations with Indian and international producers is a key element to the process of opening up these artists to larger audiences and allowing the form to remain relevant.

“The guitar today isn’t the same instrument it was 10 years ago. It has more functions, creating different sounds. Similarly, tribal folk music cannot remain confined within the same musical structures and arrangements.

Collaborations with noted Indian and international producers will allow these tribal

folk musicians to develop their sound for larger audiences,” says Abhinav.

[embedvideo id="ZRZurtm7S_s"
website="youtube"]

Next year, the foundation plans on inviting international producers with tribal artists to produce one song. In a bid to achieve it, Anahad is organising the Equals Music Festival, which will be held in Jaisalmer Fort.

As per a recent report on YourStory, “By 2020, Anahad aims to raise the economic livelihood of 30 tribes in three underprivileged musical communities of India by 70 per cent. Next year, they plan to work in Northeastern states.” This month the foundation and its band of volunteers are travelling to Punjab, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Karnataka for research on tribal folk groups

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