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## **ANTHROPOLOGY SNIPPET-355**



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## Acoustic Traditional - Preserving Indigenous Tales, Myths and Legends



India is estimated to have about 635 indigenous communities. Each of these groups of people have a unique identity, with their very own brand of culture, traditions and folklore. Unfortunately, most of this knowledge is passed on from generation to generation in the oral form, and in the face of dwindling tribal population, advent of modern education and widespread displacement in the name of development, most of this ancient wisdom is getting eroded. This is where a group of individuals calling themselves Acoustic Traditional are making an effort to preserve the precious heritage.

“Once upon a time...the kind king got married...together they slayed many demons...and then the king and the queen lived happily ever after...”

Do you relate to similar stories your Grandma would have narrated to you a few years back? I remember listening to fairy tales and mythological stories from my parents and grandparents before switching off to my dream world of imaginations. Then while I was growing I graduated from story listener to book reader and then to a story teller. I guess many of us share a similar upbringing. This time **The Better India** got a beautiful and extensive opportunity to know, interact and hear stories from **Acoustic Traditional (AT)**.

**It was during the year of 1999 in Nepal, when Mr. Salil Mukhia Kwoica and Ms. Barkha Henry thought about preserving the mountain folk music by documenting and transcribing them into sheet music (staff notations) in the hope that the music would be available for the generations to come. Mr. Salil Mukhia Kwoica says,**

I was teaching music at one of the schools in Kathmandu those days and often found time to travel the country side to listen to some old folk tunes which I would send to Barkha (who was in Darjeeling). She would then transcribe it for an instrument (usually Guitar). However, the process of documentation quickly revealed a vast arena of study as we came across the stories, myths and legends on which the music was originally based. The

realization that these stories, myths and legends were in fact the bed rock of the community's identity, culture and heritage and that they were becoming extinct as they were passed down from one generation to another usually through 'oral storytelling traditions', led us to study this area and to include a wider community in our work.

There are many indigenous communities, where population is gradually reducing and the only way their history passes on is by oral narration usually from a Shaman to his successor (a Shaman is the head/priest of the community). However with urbanization, such history is becoming lost and remains untold to the younger generations. This is where AT has taken the initiative and works in the area of documenting the oral history, the community stories, and their way of life etc, through research and dissemination projects. Their flagship annual event "the Festival of Indigenous Storytellers" is one such initiative which brings together tribal storytellers from across the country in view of sharing their stories with the world.

These narrations are not just stories but have a lot of significance in day to day rituals and are a matter of anthropological study and research. Example: Mr. Salil Mukhia Kwoica, once narrated "For a particular period in the year, some communities worship the river and do not kill the fishes; it is not superstition but actually in this month, fishes swim upstream to reproduce and lay eggs

and hence should not be killed.” All such practices are relevant and interwoven by AT. Currently, they have been traveling around Eastern Himalayas – Sikkim region and documenting folklore on Yeti and have come across many people who claim to have seen the Yeti. AT is working day and night, enjoying living with the community members and capturing their stories and planning to extend this research trip to Nepal and Bhutan.

It was an engrossing time discussing stories and obtaining views and opinions of **Mr Salil Mukhia Kwoica, Ms Minket Lepcha** and **Ms Barkha Henry**. Below is an excerpt of the interview by the group:

### **What geographies does Acoustic Traditional cover?**

Acoustic looks at working especially with mountain and forest based communities – also those communities which are seemingly vanishing (in terms of population) and where the documentation of oral traditions is nonexistent. Our focus areas have been Eastern Himalayas and the Nilgiris.

But in terms of storyteller identification/participation, we have a national reach (Karnataka/ Tamil Nadu/ Andhra Pradesh/ West Bengal/ Manipur/ Nagaland/ Sikkim/ etc.)

**How would you describe your work life? How would a day of yours be like?**



Ms Minket Lepcha: “As a documentalist my day involves working around with interviews mostly with the community elders, especially the Shamans. The interviews usually imply gathering of information on the community’s oral mythology and folklore. This depends on the nature of the project, but usually these are the things that I document. My work is mostly based in tribal villages (in Dzongu at the moment) and starts early. I often have to walk long distances to meet up with the people, sometime it takes over a day just to reach a particular community by walk. I usually spend over a week’s time at the informant’s house just to get him/her comfortable with speaking. Since most of the Shamans are old it is difficult for them to recollect stories, myths etc. and many times I join them in their household chores trying to get the story out.

However, documenting in a community is an extensive task and the engagement with the community is for a very long time, sometimes even years as we have to understand them and how they function for them to be comfortable enough to share their stories with us.”

### **What are the fun aspects and the challenges involved?**

It is always fun in the field as the terrain is scenic and at times spiritual. Interacting with the community, being invited to their ceremonies, rituals, sometimes being chased by children and old drunken storytellers is even more fun. At the end, we make up a family.

Accessibility to the villages has been a major concern because the weather changes drastically in the mountains in a short span of time causing landslides. In winters the snowfall is very heavy and that is the time when I have to postpone my scheduled visit to the villages. The other major challenge is to correctly interpret the storytellers because of the language barrier. Though a local translator is also accompanying, however a lot of ethnic words do not have an equal expression in English hence get dissolved in the process of translation.

**Tell us something about the Lepcha community.**

The Lepchas or the 'Rongkup' (being their original tribe name) are the aboriginal people of Sikkim and Darjeeling in the Eastern Himalayas. Their belief system is based on nature worship headed by a 'Bongthing' (Male Shaman) or a Mun (Female Shaman). They are also one of the oldest tribes in the region.

**It is often quoted that the tribal communities are getting disconnected from the rest of the populace over the years. What is your take on that?**

While this might be a popular notion and in many developmental ways true, there is this entire phenomenon of them being de-rooted from their own community structures due to persistent developmental attitudes that governments, educational institutions etc. bring in. Of course they remain marginalized in terms of their bigger

picture but what remains true is the fact that their meaningful development can be asserted not by coercive mainstreaming but by understanding them – the relevance of their amazing traditional knowledge, rituals, practices, oral history etc. In fact this is one priority area of Acoustic Traditional work – to bring out their relevance in their urban context.

Ms Barkha Henry's take on the same: "But I think that disconnect with their own rich traditional base is more critical to take note of. In this regard, we are losing account of mankind's primitive history and social/spiritual development; Anthropologically this is a very big loss.

It may be surprising to note but the whole notion of mainstreaming them is so intrusive and devastating, that it is making them quite disabled. We need to understand that tribal communities bring in their own "scientific heritage" and knowledge systems. Removing that completely from them and giving them a "new" education has hardly helped anything. In fact, in terms of sustainability and conservation, we still find that their mechanisms are far more effective than what most modern means offer.

As such, the context of integrating them organically is far more critical than merely mainstreaming them using mainstream ideas. I feel that first the general populace needs to understand them."



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