**The Vanishing Art of 'Pothi Bacha' in Rural Odisha: Oral Storytelling as a Sacred Tradition**

**Abstract**

In rural Odisha, the "Pothi Bacha"(Oral version of palm leaf manuscript) tradition is an age-old oral storytelling technique with strong roots in spiritual and cultural legacy. Storytellers were essential to the preservation of knowledge, history, and religious teachings because they narrated sacred texts, epics, and regional folklore. However, this rich oral tradition is in danger of being extinct due to the development of modern technology and shifting social structures. The origins, cultural significance, and contemporary deterioration of "Pothi Bacha" are examined in this essay, emphasising the critical necessity for its preservation. To record and examine this dying art form, the study uses qualitative research techniques, such as interviews with surviving storytellers, local elders, and academics. Additionally, the report suggests revitalisation tactics like community-led projects and digital preservation methods.

**Key words:** Odisha, storytelling, traditions, rural, cultural

**INTRODUCTION**

A potent tool for conserving history, passing down cultural information, and encouraging community involvement is oral storytelling. In the rural areas of Odisha, Pothi Bacha has a special position among India's diverse oral traditions. Skilled storytellers told religious texts, epics, and moral tales to an attentive audience as part of this activity, which has its roots in sacred Hindu literature and folk traditions. In contrast to written literature, which is static, Pothi Bacha was a dynamic and participatory storytelling style in which the stories were brought to life by the narrator's voice, facial expressions, and improvisations. It was a really engaging encounter that enlightened and spiritually enhanced the audience, not just a recital.

In the past, Pothi Bacha played a significant role in social events, temple rites, and village life by providing philosophical and moral guidance derived from texts such as the Puranas, Ramayana, and Mahabharata. The audience was mesmerised by the narration, which was frequently accompanied by theatrical expressions, musical elements, and rhythmic chanting. This tradition was guarded by elders, priests, and academics who made sure that holy knowledge was transmitted from one generation to the next. Nevertheless, Pothi Bacha is currently in danger of going extinct despite its rich history.

Oral traditions like Pothi Bacha have steadily declined as a result of modern entertainment outlets and fast urbanisation. Interest in these interactive storytelling techniques has decreased as a result of the move away from group gatherings and towards individual digital material consumption. Furthermore, younger generations no longer rely on oral traditions to transmit knowledge because they have access to printed books and online resources. Because of this, there are less and fewer talented storytellers, and the once-vibrant Pothi Bacha practice is disappearing from the public consciousness.

The historical development and socio cultural relevance of Pothi Bacha are examined in this essay, along with the circumstances that led to its collapse. Scholars, community elders, and surviving storytellers who have observed or taken part in this practice are interviewed using a qualitative study methodology. The study intends to demonstrate the pressing need for preservation and offer long-term solutions to bring back this revered storytelling tradition before it completely vanishes by examining the present situation of Pothi Bacha.

**METHODOLOGY**

Using ethnographic techniques and a qualitative research methodology, this study documents the "Pothi Bacha" tradition. The following techniques were applied:

a. Fieldwork & Observations: Studying storytelling sessions and audience involvement in rural Odisha communities where traces of "Pothi Bacha" are still present.

b. Interviews and Oral Histories: Discussions with community people, senior storytellers, and academics who specialise in the oral traditions of Odisha.

c. Archaeological Research: Analysing historical documents, temple logs, and regional manuscripts that make reference to "Pothi Bacha" stories.

d. Comparative Analysis: To identify similarities and differences, comparable oral traditions in different Indian states are studied.

**CULTURAL CONTEXT & CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES**

1. **Historical Background and Cultural Significance**

The origins of "Pothi Bacha" can be found in the temple towns of Odisha, where intellectuals and priests would performatively recite sacred texts. The storytelling was both instructive and spiritually enlightening because it was frequently paired with participatory questions, musical elements, and rhythmic chanting. In rural areas, "Pothi Bacha" gatherings were held in courtyards, village squares, or temples, and they drew sizable crowds who were keen to hear and consider the lessons.

**2. The Process & Performance of ‘Pothi Bacha’**

Storytellers, who were known as "Pothi Bacha," used a manner of narrative that was both structured and adaptable. To bring stories to life, they used improvisation, recollection, and audience participation. Sacred texts and traditional wisdom are meticulously preserved, recited, and passed down orally and in writing as part of the Pothi Bacha process. In order to ensure the authenticity of these manuscripts, scholars or custodians—who are frequently trained in ancient scripts and languages—carefully study, commit to memory, and analyse them. The performance component is rhythmic recitation with rituals occasionally included, with a focus on meaning, intonation, and pronunciation. Traditionally, this technique was carried out in royal courts, scholastic groups, or temples where texts were not only read but also held in high regard as holy artefacts. Pothi Bacha preserved the generational continuity of spiritual and cultural knowledge via rigorous study and oral tradition. Important components included:

1. **Thematic Selection (Choosing relevant texts based on festivals, social events, or moral teachings):**

The stories told in Pothi Bacha were not picked at random; rather, they were chosen with care to fit certain events, societal settings, and audience-relevant moral precepts. Narrators would recount stories from the Mahabharata or Ramayana that focused on devotion and dharma at religious celebrations such as Rath Yatra or Kartik Purnima. Stories from the Puranas or folklore honouring nature, prosperity, and communal harmony were preferred on special occasions such as harvest festivals or village get-togethers. Similar to this, narrators would choose tales that emphasised values like honesty, patience, or selflessness when discussing moral or ethical issues, so utilising storytelling as a tool for social and spiritual education.

1. **Narrative Techniques (A mix of recitation, dramatic expressions, and rhetorical questioning to maintain audience interest):**

Pothi Bacha was a show that enthralled people with captivating storytelling techniques; it was more than merely reciting scripture. Recitation was employed by narrators to preserve the veracity of sacred writings; they frequently chanted phrases in a rhythmic manner to produce a meditative effect. To make characters and events come to life, they used theatrical expressions such different speech tones, hand gestures, and facial expressions. Another popular strategy was rhetorical inquiry, in which narrators would pause to provide challenging queries to the audience regarding the meaning of the story. This promoted more in-depth contemplation and increased audience participation. These components transformed Pothi Bacha into an engaging experience rather than merely a lesson.

1. **Community Participation (Encouraging listeners to ask questions, share interpretations, and relate the stories to their personal experiences.):**

Pothi Bacha's interactive style, in which the audience participated actively rather than passively, was one of its main features. In order to promote conversation and a greater comprehension of the stories, the villagers were invited to raise questions. In order to reinforce traditional values, elders would offer their interpretations of the stories, frequently relating them to actual events. Incorporating personal experiences allowed listeners to extract lessons from the stories' morals and apply them to their own lives. In addition to maintaining the tradition's interest, this participatory approach made sure that every storytelling session was a distinctive and changing experience that was influenced by the community's collective expertise.

1. **Decline of ‘Pothi Bacha’ and Contributing Factors**

There are a number of reasons for the collapse of Pothi Bacha, the custom of preserving manuscripts and passing along information orally. Modern educational systems gave digital and printed formats precedence over oral traditions, and the transition from handwritten manuscripts to printed volumes lessened the necessity for careful preservation. Its demise was also influenced by shifting lifestyles, less funding for academics, and the waning influence of traditional knowledge keepers. This age-old tradition was further marginalised and lost its relevance in modern society due to a lack of institutional backing and technological improvements. A number of technological and sociocultural shifts have contributed to "Pothi Bacha's" decline:

1. **Impact of Modernization (Television, radio, and digital media have replaced traditional storytelling as primary sources of information and entertainment):**

Modern entertainment platforms have eclipsed traditional narrative forms like Pothi Bacha due to the rapid improvements in technology. People's interest in live oral storytelling is declining as a result of the readily available and visually appealing content offered by social media, radio, and television. Because contemporary technology provides rapid pleasure, audience engagement with this age-old tradition is declining, in contrast to Pothi Bacha, which necessitates patience and active participation. Furthermore, the close-knit village communities where these storytelling sessions were an integral part of everyday life have been upended by urban migration.

1. **Lack of Practitioners (With the passing of elderly storytellers, there are fewer successors willing to continue the tradition):**

Pothi Bacha was traditionally passed down through the generations, with younger people being mentored by more seasoned storytellers. However, fewer successors are eager to continue the tradition as older storytellers die. The impression that oral traditions are out of date, shifting job goals, and the lack of financial stability in storytelling are some of the causes of this. It is also challenging to maintain because younger generations are less exposed to the training and culture required for this art form. Pothi Bacha is in danger of going extinct if knowledge is not actively transmitted.

1. **Shifts in Education Systems (Formal education and printed texts have reduced the reliance on oral traditions for knowledge transmission):**

Oral traditions used to be the main way that history, morals, and knowledge were transmitted. Oral storytelling has lost significance, though, as formal education systems have grown, emphasising written texts and standardised curricula. Indigenous storytelling traditions are not given much space in schools and colleges, which prioritise intellectual learning. Pothi Bacha is gradually vanishing from cultural and intellectual spheres as a result of its diminished value as an educational instrument.

1. **Changing Audience Preferences (Younger generations prefer digital platforms, leading to decreased attendance at storytelling sessions):**

Audiences, particularly the younger generation, have acquired distinct preferences for absorbing information and entertainment in the fast-paced digital world of today. They prefer visually exciting stuff, such podcasts, social media reels, and YouTube videos. While Pothi Bacha necessitates effort and involvement, these digital formats offer variation and on-demand access. Individual media consumption is displacing the social aspect of traditional storytelling, which further reduces interest in getting together for live storytelling events.

**4. The Need for Preservation & Revival Strategies**

In order to protect the traditional knowledge, cultural heritage, and oral transmission traditions that have been fundamental to India's intellectual and spiritual history, Pothi Bacha must be preserved. Modernisation has led to a decrease in handwritten texts and oral recitation, thus it is critical to preserve this history before it becomes extinct. It is imperative that these old writings be preserved for future generations since they provide priceless insights into philosophy, science, the arts, and religious traditions. We run the risk of losing not only historical records but also the underlying wisdom they contain if we don't take proactive preservation measures.

Reviving Pothi Bacha requires a multifaceted strategy. Rare manuscripts can become more widely available through digitisation and interactive learning tools. In order to encourage future generations to participate in these behaviours, educational institutions ought to integrate traditional knowledge systems into their curricula. Oral recitation traditions can also be revived through workshops, performances, and archival initiatives organised by government agencies and cultural organisations. Pothi Bacha can be revived by fusing ancient methods with modern technology, guaranteeing its continued relevance and continuation in today's world.

To prevent the complete disappearance of ‘Pothi Bacha,’ targeted preservation strategies are necessary:

1. **Community Engagement Programs (Encouraging local communities to organize storytelling festivals and workshops to revive interest):**

Local communities must take an active role in reviving Pothi Bacha. By bringing practitioners, academics, and audiences together, storytelling festivals and seminars can provide a stage for live performances. These gatherings, where seasoned storytellers can impart their wisdom to younger generations, can take place in temples, community centres, or educational institutions. The practice can also be maintained by starting local storytelling organisations, which will guarantee that it continues to be a common feature of social and cultural events. The ritual can also be made more visible and interesting through community-driven projects like monthly storytelling sessions or incorporating Pothi Bacha into religious ceremonies and village fairs.

1. **Integration into Education (Introducing ‘Pothi Bacha’ as a part of school and university curricula to foster cultural appreciation):**

Pothi Bacha's preservation for future generations can be aided by its inclusion in university and school curricula. Schools can teach students about traditional narratives in an interesting way by incorporating interactive storytelling sessions into language, literature, or moral science programs. Research and documentation might be encouraged by universities offering courses on oral traditions and folklore. It is possible to further foster awareness and active participation by encouraging students to take part in storytelling contests, dramatizations, and creative writing assignments inspired by these stories.

1. **Digital Documentation (Recording and archiving storytelling sessions to create an accessible online repository):**

Technology can be very helpful in protecting Pothi Bacha. Accessibility to a larger audience can be guaranteed by capturing storytelling sessions on audio and video and building an online archive. Traditional storytellers can share their art on platforms such as YouTube, podcasts, and digital libraries. Reaching audiences throughout the world can also be facilitated by transcribing and translating these stories into several languages. Pothi Bacha can be further modernised and promoted without losing its core by working with academics, filmmakers, and content producers to create interactive e-books, animated versions, or documentaries.

1. **Government & Institutional Support (Seeking cultural grants and policy interventions to support storytellers and their training):**

Academic institutions, cultural organisations, and government agencies must formally support Pothi Bacha in order to continue. Seeking grants, funding, and policy assistance can help storytellers get financial support so they can keep up their professional practice. Government programs like cultural festivals, folk art scholarships, and heritage conservation projects can aid in the wider promotion of Pothi Bacha. Furthermore, collaboration with research institutes, museums, and performing arts academies can provide storytellers with organised training and performance venues, guaranteeing the legacy is transmitted in a methodical manner.

These strategies, when combined, can help restore Pothi Bacha as a vibrant cultural practice while adapting it to contemporary settings.

**CONCLUSION**

The demise of "Pothi Bacha" signifies the crucial loss of a storytelling custom as well as a whole way of thinking that has influenced Odisha communities for many centuries. Oral traditions such as "Pothi Bacha" provide insights into indigenous ways of seeing and experiencing the world and act as living archives of wisdom, ethics, and spirituality. It is crucial to record, preserve, and advance this holy legacy as modernisation quickens and influences from throughout the world transform cultural identities.

Collaboration between local communities, academics, governmental organisations, and digital media platforms is necessary to revitalise "Pothi Bacha." The fundamental nature of oral storytelling—an immersive, participatory approach to knowledge transmission—must be maintained even though it inevitably changes with time. Combining technology and tradition could be a solution, with internet platforms, podcasts, and recorded sessions acting as contemporary channels for an ancient art form. Additionally, the power of oral history can be reintroduced to younger generations through the inclusion of "Pothi Bacha" storytelling traditions in school curriculum.

Making sure practitioners are financially viable is another crucial component. Few people would pursue storytelling as a full-time career without financial incentives. Programs such as performance-based funding, artist residencies, and cultural grants might offer the assistance that is required. Additionally, storytelling festivals in villages that are styled after folk fairs can establish areas where "Pothi Bacha" flourishes as a social gathering rather than a sentimental holdover from the past.

In the end, "Pothi Bacha's" existence hinges on everyone's willingness to appreciate it. If left untended, decades of accumulated knowledge will be lost as it fades into obscurity. However, with perseverance, this revered oral tradition can continue to improve people's lives, unite generations, and serve as evidence of Odisha's rich cultural legacy. Its preservation is essential to ensuring that indigenous knowledge and storytelling continue to play a significant role in the human experience, not merely to pay respect to the past.

**COMPETING INTERESTS DISCLAIMER:**

Authors have declared that they have no known competing financial interests OR non-financial interests OR personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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