**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 (Mohanty 2008). However, this rich oral tradition is in danger of being extinct due to the development of modern technology and shifting social structures (Das 2020). This study aims to document the historical development, socio-cultural significance, and decline of Pothi Bacha. It also seeks to explore the factors contributing to its decline and propose viable strategies for its revival. The research is based on secondary sources, including scholarly publications, online archives, and government reports (Government of Odisha, 2019). Key findings highlight the dwindling number of practitioners, shifts in audience preferences, and the challenges of sustaining oral traditions in contemporary society (Mishra 2015). The paper proposes revitalization strategies such as community-led initiatives, digital documentation, and educational integration to ensure the survival of this storytelling art form.

**Key words:** oral traditions, cultural preservation, folklore, heritage

**INTRODUCTION**

Oral storytelling is a powerful medium for preserving history, transmitting cultural knowledge, and fostering community engagement (Biswal & Pramanik, 2019). Among India's diverse oral traditions, Pothi Bacha holds a unique place in rural Odisha. Rooted in sacred Hindu literature and folk traditions, skilled storytellers once narrated religious texts, epics, and moral tales to engaged audiences (Mishra, 2007). Unlike static written literature, Pothi Bacha was a dynamic and participatory storytelling format, where narrators employed expressive voice modulations, gestures, and improvisation (Mahapatra, 1979).

Historically, Pothi Bacha was central to social events, temple rituals, and village life, imparting philosophical and moral lessons derived from texts like the Puranas, Ramayana, and Mahabharata (Mishra, 2020). This tradition thrived under the guardianship of elders, priests, and scholars who ensured its transmission across generations. However, despite its rich heritage, Pothi Bacha is now at risk of disappearing.

Modern entertainment, urbanization, and digital consumption have significantly contributed to the decline of oral traditions like Pothi Bacha (Panda, 2021). With younger generations increasingly relying on printed books and digital resources, the role of live storytelling has diminished (Sahoo, 2022). Consequently, the number of skilled practitioners has dwindled, and Pothi Bacha is gradually fading from public consciousness.

The scope of this study includes an in-depth examination of the historical evolution, socio-cultural impact, and decline of Pothi Bacha. It also investigates contemporary challenges and presents strategic recommendations for preservation. By analyzing secondary sources, including books, journal articles, and online resources, this research contributes to the broader discourse on indigenous storytelling traditions. This study is important because it highlights the cultural loss associated with the disappearance of oral traditions and provides practical solutions for their revival in the digital era (Turin, Wheeler, & Wilkinson, 2013).

**METHODOLOGY**

This study is based on a qualitative analysis of secondary sources, including academic literature, government reports, and digital archives related to the Pothi Bacha tradition (Berez, 2013). The research methodology includes:

1. ***Literature Review:*** Examining books, journal articles, and previous research on oral traditions and storytelling practices in Odisha.(Mishra, 2020).
2. ***Archival Research***: Analyzing digitally available historical documents, temple records, and government reports that reference Pothi Bacha. Sources include online repositories, scholarly articles, and cultural research studies, rather than direct access to physical records (Government of Odisha, 2019).
3. ***Comparative Analysis:*** Studying similar oral traditions in other Indian states to identify parallels and distinctions (Panda, 2021). Some notable examples include:

Pandavani (Chhattisgarh & Madhya Pradesh) – A storytelling tradition based on the Mahabharata.

Kathakalakshepam (Tamil Nadu) – A musical storytelling tradition narrating Hindu scriptures.

Baul Songs (West Bengal) – Oral spiritual storytelling through music and poetry.

Dastangoi (North India) – An ancient Persian-originated storytelling art form.

1. ***Online Resources:*** Utilizing digital archives, videos, and ethnographic studies available online to gain insights into the tradition’s evolution(Panda, 2021).

Key sources include:

Google Scholar for peer-reviewed articles.

National Digital Library of India (NDLI) for archived books and research papers.

Sahapedia for cultural documentation and interviews related to Odisha’s oral traditions.

YouTube for recorded storytelling performances and discussions on Pothi Bacha.

**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 (Mishra, 2020).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 (Mohanty, 2008)

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**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) (Das, 2020):**

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) (Mishra, 2015).:**

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.) (Panda, 2021):**

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) (Sahoo, 2022):**

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) (Berez, 2013):**

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) (Turin, Wheeler, & Wilkinson, 2013).**

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) (Panda, 2021)**

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** (Das, 2020)

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) (Mishra, 2020):**

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) (Sahoo, 2022)**

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) (Berez, 2013).**

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) (Turin, Wheeler, & Wilkinson, 2013).**

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 decline of Pothi Bacha signifies not only the fading of a storytelling tradition but also the loss of a cultural heritage that has shaped Odisha’s identity for centuries (Turin, Wheeler, & Wilkinson, 2013). Oral traditions like Pothi Bacha serve as living archives of wisdom, ethics, and spirituality, offering invaluable insights into indigenous ways of understanding the world (Berez, 2013).

Preserving this tradition requires a multifaceted approach, integrating community efforts, academic research, and digital initiatives(Das, 2020). While modernization has altered storytelling practices, leveraging technology and educational inclusion can help sustain Pothi Bacha in contemporary settings. Strengthening awareness through cultural festivals, policy interventions, and digital platforms will ensure that this oral tradition remains relevant and accessible to future generations (Panda, 2021). By taking proactive measures, we can protect Pothi Bacha from disappearing into obscurity and reinforce its significance as an enduring component of Odisha’s cultural fabric (Sahoo, 2022)

**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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