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Indigenous Women's Folklore: A Decolonial Knowledge System

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Abstract

Colonial regimes of knowledge profoundly shaped Indian historiography by privileging textual archives and state-centric narratives while marginalizing Indigenous knowledge systems, particularly those produced by Indigenous women. Despite challenging colonial historiography, postcolonial and subaltern studies mostly viewed Indigenous experiences through the lens of resistance, providing less focus with oral traditions and folklore as autonomous systems of knowledge production. By highlighting Indigenous women's folklore as a decolonial knowledge system, this paper critically analyzing these epistemic constraints. It makes the case that storytelling, songs, myths, oral memory, ritual practices, and collective narratives are acceptable historical archives that preserve ecological wisdom, ethical values, historical consciousness, and community-based knowledge by drawing on postcolonial, Indigenous, and decolonial scholarship. The paper presents folklore as an essential part of the Indian Knowledge System that has supported Indigenous people for generations, rather than just as a reaction to colonial dominance. The study acknowledges the contributions of Indigenous women as stewards of unwritten histories and living knowledge systems while challenging the dominance of colonial and textual modes of knowledge by restoring these neglected epistemic traditions. It contends that in order to decolonize Indian historiography and create a more inclusive understanding of history, knowledge production, and the epistemic agency of Indigenous women, it is imperative to recognize these oral traditions.

Keywords: *Indigenous Women, Folklore, Decolonial Knowledge System, Oral Traditions, Indigenous Epistemology, Storytelling, Collective Memory, Cultural Heritage, Indigenous Historiography, Oral Archives, Epistemic Resistance, Indian Knowledge System*

Introduction

This paper critically analyses how colonial knowledge regimes influenced Indian history and how these epistemic frameworks still influence postcolonial historical writing, especially when it comes to how Indigenous women are portrayed. Even many left-leaning Marxist and postcolonial historians tended to favour textual archives and state-centric histories, frequently marginalizing Indigenous epistemologies and oral traditions, even as postcolonial study questioned colonial narratives.

In colonial archives, subaltern women were denied both the space and the power to speak, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal definition of the "gendered subaltern" illustrated. Her study is mainly limited to the colonial archive and provides little interaction with Indigenous women's folklore and oral traditions as independent systems of knowledge production, even if her intervention is still fundamental to postcolonial feminist scholarship. As a result, no substance is acknowledged about the epistemic value of Indigenous myths, songs, storytelling, and communal memory. By acknowledging oral memory, community narratives, ritual practices, and bodily experiences as valid historical archives, this study, situated within postcolonial feminist and Indigenous studies, highlights Indigenous women's folklore as a decolonial knowledge system.

It contends that colonial knowledge is constantly reconstructed, contested, and transformed by Indigenous women's storytelling, cultural transmission, and everyday act of survival rather than being passively inherited or uncontested. The paper aims to reclaim Indigenous women's epistemic agency and further decolonize Indian historiography by emphasizing folklore as a locus of historical knowledge.

Rather than limiting Indigenous women's folklore to a narrative of resistance against colonialism, this paper argues for its recognition as an integral component of the Indian knowledge system. While postcolonial scholarship has made significant contributions by recovering marginalized voices and interpreting Indigenous narratives as forms of resistance, it has often confined these traditions within the framework of coloniality.

This paper moves beyond that perspective by treating Indigenous women's folklore as a living epistemic tradition that embodies ecological wisdom, ethical values, historical memory, cultural continuity, and community-based modes of knowledge production. Reclaiming these oral traditions as legitimate knowledge systems not only broadens the scope of Indigenous epistemologies but also enriches the understanding of the plurality and diversity of Indian knowledge systems.

Examining the Methodological Limitations of Postcolonial

In the early 1980s, the Subaltern Studies project emerged as a major intervention in South Asian historiography by adapting Antonio Gramsci's concept of the subaltern. Led by scholars such as Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the project sought to rewrite history from below by recovering the voices of marginalized groups excluded from elite historical narratives. Debates soon arose over who constituted the subaltern. While early Subaltern Studies focused on peasants, the proletariat, and Indigenous communities, Spivak's influential essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) challenged the exclusion of women. She argued that Western Marxist and colonial frameworks were inadequate for capturing the fragmented and complex experiences of subaltern women, whose voices remained absent from dominant historical and theoretical discourses (Spivak 1988).

Spivak advanced this critique through two key interventions. First, in her reading of Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories,* she interprets the character of Jashoda as exposing the exploitation of women's labour and bodies under intersecting structures of patriarchy and class (Spivak 1988). Second, through her analysis of the abolition of *Sati* and the case of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, Spivak demonstrates how colonial and patriarchal discourses silenced women's voices. While colonial authorities justified intervention as saving "brown women from brown men," they denied women any agency. Similar to the above, Bhubaneswari's politically motivated suicide was reinterpreted through patriarchal presumptions and shorn of its anti-colonial meaning, demonstrating how the voice of the subaltern woman becomes unintelligible in dominant discourse (Spivak 1988).

Spivak's contributions are still very important, especially her emphasis on emphasizing gender in postcolonial studies. However, rather than directly addressing the actual realities of Indigenous women in their everyday cultural and epistemic contexts, her research frequently concentrates more on literary, historical, and religious discourses. On the other hand, because many forms of Indigenous women's resistance are articulated through oral storytelling, collective memory, ecological practices, ceremonial and religious performances, and everyday cultural survival, they cannot be reduced to victim narratives. Because they transcend the boundaries of elite textual analysis, these varied and corporeal forms of resistance and knowledge production merit equal scholarly consideration in postcolonial and Indigenous studies.

Folklore and Knowledge Production: A Theoretical Approach:

Storytelling is more than just a means of amusement or cultural preservation in indigenous societies. Instead, it serves as a system of instruction, spirituality, collective memory, and historical continuity. Relationships between the land, ancestors, environment, labour, and communal life are preserved through myths, ceremonial narratives, and performances. Indigenous women preserve knowledge through oral transmission that is undermining from institutional historiography and official archives.

Indigenous thinker like Gregory Cajete contend that storytelling, which helps communities maintain ties to ancestors, the land, spirituality, and collective memory, is at the core of learning itself. As a result, storytelling serves as a historical archive, pedagogy, and philosophy all at once. Because epistemologies valued written evidence over collective and embodied forms of knowledge, oral traditions were often neglected. Instead of being acknowledged as valid forms of historical and intellectual production, indigenous stories, songs, and narratives were written off as myths. Through oral memory, storytelling, ritual performance, and songs, indigenous women managed to maintain cultural continuity and historical knowledge in spite of this marginalization (Cajete 2017).

Storytelling becomes a method of epistemic resistance as well as a pedagogical practice in this setting. Indigenous women maintain ecological knowledge, healing techniques, displacement histories, gendered experiences, and cultural identity throughout generations through oral traditions. Thus, storytelling serves as a decolonial means of knowledge sharing that subverts colonial hierarchies of legitimacy in addition to serving as memory (Cajete 2017). Discussions about the health of indigenous women and historical trauma also highlight the value of storytelling. Indigenous scholars contend that intergenerational trauma, ecological displacement, and social marginalization are some of the ways that colonial violence still affects indigenous bodies, communities, and everyday life (Ibid).

Therefore, oral storytelling and group performance are crucial for cultural continuity, healing, and survival. An essential foundation for comprehending indigenous women's oral traditions as active means of resistance rather than passive survival is provided by Gerald Vizenor's concept of “survivance.” An active Indigenous presence that opposes dominance while preserving cultural continuity, identity, and memory is referred to as survival. Thus, the storytelling customs of Indigenous women constitute continuous acts of cultural and epistemic resistance (Vizenor 2009).

This contrast is important because, by focusing on adaptation rather than structural change, discourses of resilience can normalize oppression. On the other hand, survival emphasizes resistance, continuity, and agency. The oral traditions of indigenous women are used by communities to actively regain their identity and maintain alternative knowledge systems. By linking ancestral memory to decolonized futures, Noelani Goodyear-Kaʻōpua deepens this knowledge. Indigenous futurity places a strong emphasis on using ancestral knowledge, relationships, and group

responsibility to recreate Indigenous worlds. Thus, oral archives and storytelling customs actively envision and maintain Indigenous futures rather than only preserving the past (Goodyear 2017).

Indigenous Women's Voices in Translation: Storytelling as Sites of Knowledge Transmission:

Indigenous histories, identities, and knowledge systems that are frequently left out of written archives are preserved in large part through oral traditions and embodied memory. Many indigenous tribes use storytelling, music, rituals, dance, and group performances in addition to texts and institutional archives to preserve their memories. Communities are able to maintain ecological knowledge, displacement experiences, labour practices, and cultural continuity throughout generations thanks to these modes of knowledge transfer (Singh 2019).

Santhal Women's Oral Traditions: Folklore as Living Archive:

The oral traditions of Santhal women provide a significant illustration of how folklore serves as epistemic resistance. Through songs sung during seasonal festivals like Sohrai, marriage ceremonies, and agricultural labor, Santhal women actively contribute to the preservation and transmission of community knowledge. According to Patnaik (2002), these songs serve as living archives that conserve ecological knowledge, cultural memory, histories, and experiences that are frequently left out of official historical records.

Folk songs from Santhal women often depict experiences of ecological destruction, labor exploitation, land dispossession, and displacement. Women keep memories of colonial forest limits, ancestral land loss, and the changes to indigenous existence under colonial and postcolonial government through oral performance (Carrin 2022).

For example, songs sung during agricultural labour often encode experiences of displacement and alienation:

"We sow the seeds in borrowed land,
The forest that fed us is now silent..."

These lines communicate the realities of dispossession and ecological loss experienced by Santhal communities. "Borrowed land" reflects the erosion of indigenous land ownership under colonial policies, while the "silent forest" symbolizes the destruction of ecological relationships central to indigenous identity.

The collective nature of singing and remembering is especially significant. When Santhal women sing together during rituals and labour, oral tradition becomes a medium through which historical consciousness is transmitted across generations. In this process, the body itself becomes an archive, and performance becomes a form of knowledge transfer. Memory is preserved through repetition, rhythm, movement, and communal participation rather than through written documentation (Patnaik 2002, Carrin 2022).

These oral traditions challenge colonial epistemologies that privilege written texts as the only legitimate form of historical knowledge. Santhal women's folklore demonstrates that knowledge also survives through embodied performance and collective memory. Their songs therefore function as forms of epistemic resistance by preserving alternative histories and indigenous ways of knowing outside dominant archival structures (Carrin 2022).

Maki Munda and the Erasure of Indigenous Women's Resistance:

The silencing of indigenous women within dominant historiography can also be observed in the history of Birsa Munda's Ulgulan against British colonial rule between 1895 and 1900. While mainstream nationalist narratives largely celebrate male leaders such as Birsa Munda, the participation of indigenous women in the movement remains marginalized within official archives (Singh 2024).

One significant example is Maki Munda, the wife of Gaya Munda, a close associate of Birsa Munda. Maki Munda actively resisted British colonial forces and participated in anti-colonial struggles alongside her daughters Thingi, Nagi, and Lembu. Historical accounts describe her as fearless and courageous, willing to confront British police authorities despite violent repression. She and other women of her family endured imprisonment, violence, and the loss of family members, yet continued resisting colonial domination (Sahare 2021, Singh 2024).

What becomes important in Maki Munda's story is not only her participation in resistance but also her absence from mainstream historical narratives. Colonial and nationalist histories often foreground male leadership while reducing women to secondary or invisible figures. Although official records mention the imprisonment and punishment of Maki Munda and her daughters, their role as active political agents and fighters remained largely unrecognized (Singh 2024).

The histories of several other indigenous women associated with the movement, including the wives of Bankan Munda, Dungdung Munda, and Monjhia Munda, remain fragmented or unnamed within official records. Despite the fact that many of these women lost their lives while battling British soldiers during the rebellion, oral histories, local accounts, and community histories—rather than institutional historiography—are the main ways that their contributions endure.

This epistemic exclusion shows how colonial archives suppressed the collective resistance of indigenous women while supporting particular types of political leadership. The contributions of women are lost if Ulgulan's history is recreated by using official documents. In order to retrieve these suppressed histories, oral traditions, local memory, and indigenous narratives become crucial.

The narrative of Maki Munda questions prevailing conceptions that exclusively depict indigenous women as helpless victims of colonial abuse. Rather, her existence is an example of embodied resistance based on community survival, political engagement, and group struggle. She actively opposed colonial power rather than being silent or destroying herself as a form of resistance. In this regard, Maki Munda is a significant illustration of indigenous women's cognitive resistance against historical erasure and colonial dominance.

Conclusion:

The perspectives and experiences of Indigenous women have historically been neglected by colonial and postcolonial knowledge systems, as this study has explored. It draws attention to the fact that these experiences have frequently been portrayed by mainstream and left-leaning academic traditions without being fully acknowledged as valid modes of knowledge production. However, within the larger context of Indianness and the Indian Knowledge System, there is a growing emphasis in modern India on rediscovering unwritten histories and recognizing the accomplishments of unsung heroes.

Indigenous women's resistance endures through oral memory and communal narratives, even when official archives fail to fully acknowledge them, as exemplified by the folk traditions of Garhwal women and Maki Munda. Recovering such suppressed histories through alternative archives, folklore, storytelling, and local memory thus becomes a crucial decolonial intervention that honors these unsung women whose achievements are yet unrecorded in written history.

Ultimately, Indigenous women's storytelling traditions and collective memories are not mere remnants of culture but active epistemological systems through which memory, resistance, healing, and futurity are sustained. Through storytelling, song, oral memory, and embodied performance, Indigenous women challenge colonial erasure while preserving alternative ways of knowing rooted in community, land, and intergenerational continuity. Recognizing these knowledge systems is therefore essential for developing a more inclusive and decolonized understanding of history, resistance, and Indigenous women's agency.

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Conflicts of interest

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