

Contextualizing The Issues of Preserving the Tripuri Folktale Chethuang In The 21st Century



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Abstract

Moving from oral narratives to digital media brings harmony between old tales and new technologies, showing how traditional stories and technology work together. The transition from orality to digitality marks a significant shift in how cultural narratives are preserved, interpreted and transmitted in the 21st century. The primary objective of the study focuses on the Tripuri folktale Chethuang to explore how indigenous oral traditions are being reshaped and preserved through digital platform. Historically grounded in communal and performative settings, the folktale exemplifies the dynamic nature of oral storytelling in Tripuri culture. With technological advancements, these narratives are now finding expression in digital formats, leading to new modes of meaning-making. This research examines how adaptation from oral to digital storytelling transforms narrative structure, performative elements, and audience interaction. The study employs a comparative approach, analyzing Chethuang in its oral and digital forms. It examines changes in narrative techniques, performative elements, and audience interaction. While digital platforms offer new opportunities for wider dissemination and creative expression, this article critically examines how such adaptations may also alter the cultural essence and emotional resonance that oral tradition carries. This study explores how indigenous storytelling practices can adapt to digital formats by maintaining a careful balance- where digitization supports the cultural depth and integrity of traditional folktales rather than overshadowing it.

Keywords: Oral Tradition, Preservation, Digital, Chethuang, Folk

1. Introduction

Situated in the northeastern region of India, Tripura is a state marked by its unique socio-cultural matrix and historical depth. Bordered by Bangladesh on three sides and connected to the Indian mainland through Assam and Mizoram, the state has cultivated a rich mosaic of tribal and non-tribal speakers, among which the Tripuri- the largest indigenous group. It comprises of several clans such as Debbarma, Reang, Jamatia and many others, who have historically preserved their cultural identity through oral traditions, rituals, and communal storytelling (Banerjee). Folktales within the Tripuri cultural landscapes are not mere narratives; they are active repositories of indigenous epistemology and social organization. As a part of cultural heritage, these stories form part of an ancestral continuum, encoding lessons about nature, kinship, morality, and spiritual belief systems. One such tale is *Chethuang*, a narrative rooted specifically in the state of Tripura. Passed down orally from one generation to the next, *Chethuang* serves not only as a cultural artifact but as a living text that embodies the community's worldview and ecological ethos. The *Chethuang* tale is particularly significant for the spiritual connection it maintains with nature. Sacred trees, in many communities, hold profound symbolic

meanings serving as spiritual connectors between the human and the divine realms as well as acting as a source of healing and protection. In Savitri's Tryst with Death by Dr. Surekha Verma, the researcher comments on the cosmic permanence and immortality associated with the banyan tree. Its sacred symbolism is ritually enacted during the Vat Savitri Festival², where married women tie red or saffron threads three times around the banyan tree while recounting the story of Savitri and Satyavan³- a tale of unwavering devotion in which Savitri rescues her husband from death through love and resilience. This act of tying threads accompanied by oral narration becomes a performative reinforcement of cultural belief. In Hindu tradition, it is believed that by performing this ritual, women pray for the long life and well-being of their husbands. Similarly, the sacred Chethuang tree for the Tripuri people⁴ also functions as a site of spiritual healing for peace and protection from suffering. These practices rooted in folklore tradition, preserve the symbolic essence of the tree. In this context, the paper undertakes a critical examination of the Chethuang folktale by situating it within three modes of transmission: oral, written, and digital. Each of these modes entails a reconfiguration of narrative space and

experience, shaping not only how stories are told but also how they are felt, remembered, and inherited (Rico et al). The study foregrounds the question of preservation- not simply as an act of documentation but as an ongoing negotiation between tradition and transformation. It draws attention to how storytelling operates within spatial, technological, and affective frameworks, and how the transition from oral performance to digital adaptation implicates the very integrity of the cultural memory that the tale seeks to preserve. The preservation and reinterpretation of traditional narratives is marked by a dynamic shift in the mediums through which stories are told and experienced (Johnson). This paper aims to contextualize the challenges and transformations involved in adapting the Tripuri folktale *Chethuang* that is originally rooted in oral tradition into the digital sphere. Central to this transformation is the concept of narrative space which refers not only to the physical or virtual locations where stories are shared but also to the conditions and experiences they create for both storyteller and audience (Puxan-Oliva). *Chethuang* is a vessel of communal memory, tradition and identity. In its oral form, the tale was transmitted from one generation to another through performative narration, marked by the physical presence of both storyteller and audience. The transition from orality to written literature introduces a kind of narrative space where the performative immediacy of orality was replaced by solitary reading, where interpretation became internalized rather than shared. That is, in written texts, the reader engages privately with the story, constructing meaning internally without the presence of a live storyteller. Also, in relation to it scholars such as Jack Goody have argued that literacy introduces abstraction and standardization, thereby altering the fluid and communal nature of oral traditions (Collin). In this context, the folktale *Chethuang* if rendered in written form may preserve its narrative content but risks losing the cultural depth, central to its traditional mode of expression. For instance, when *Chethuang* is narrated orally, it might often evoke specific emotions and responses in the listener, fostering a sense of connection with the story. This emotional engagement shaped by the storyteller's voice, when transcribed in written form, might be partially lost, as the essence of telling and re-telling the narrative cannot be captured through writing. In written form, the story is filtered through the individual imagination of the writer, whose interpretation inevitably shapes the narrative. When readers later engage with the text, they interpret it through their own subjective lens, further distancing the story from its oral context. Each narrator and listener's 'horizon of expectation'⁵ adds to the tale; in

whichever mode the narration takes place. As a result, the shift from orality to literacy not only changes the mode of transmission but also alters how the story is experienced and understood. This paper considers such spatial shifts and explores how they impact the affective and communal power of the folktale. Later, the emergence of digital media introduces yet another transformation in the spatial experience of storytelling. It offers new tools for storytelling, including visual imagery, soundscapes, animation, and user interaction. Through such tools, folktales can reach global audiences and re-engage younger generations who are native to digital environments (Brown). A thorough examination reveals the ways in which digitalization changes the dynamics of storytelling in audiences, upending conventional mechanisms of transmission while generating new avenues for interaction and interpretation. The inhabitants of the state show a strong dedication to preserve their cultural legacy in the digital age by using technology while upholding tradition which is documented in YouTube through the cinematic adaptation of the folktale *Chethuang* (2016) uploaded by KOKTRIPURA EXCLUSIVE6. Adopting digital platforms give communities more influence and guarantees that their viewpoints are not neglected and listened far and wide, preserving the depth of vernacular culture for a world that is genuinely interconnected (Blank). The ultimate effort to archive the traditional norms is to spread awareness of its cultural tapestry and enduring beauty (Singh). This balancing action needs to go through a careful consideration of cultural sensitivities, historical context, and technological advancements in the fast-evolving digital world. However, these technological affordances also bring significant challenges. As theorized by Henry Jenkins in *Convergence Culture*, digital media enables participatory storytelling, but this interactivity also reconfigures narrative authority and authenticity (Jenkins 268). In the case of the Tripuri folktale *Chethuang*, its adaptation into digital formats introduces both narrative similarities and distortions. Structurally, the thematic framework may remain unchanged, but the shift in medium can affect the way the story is received and interpreted by audiences. Technological factors, including cinematic techniques and editing choices, may at times distance viewers from the cultural and emotional depth of the original narrative. For instance, in the digital adaptation, the *Chethuang* tree might be shown visually with added voice-over to indicate its importance. While this may serve an explanatory function, it lacks the immersive quality of oral narration, where the storyteller's voice, tone, and pacing build a multisensory atmosphere that

conveys the tree's significance more vividly. Thus, although digital adaptations offer preservation opportunities, they also necessitate careful consideration of how narrative experience is altered in the process, especially in a context where contemporary audiences are more closely aligned with digital engagement than with traditional oral practices. Ultimately, the narrative of Chethuang is more than a tale—it is a site of cultural continuity. Its adaptation into digital form makes it not only an agent of creative preservation but a marker of cultural preservation. This examination offers an opportunity to understand the broader mechanisms through which oral traditions are reimagined in the contemporary world. Through an investigation into how Chethuang travels across different narrative mediums, this paper seeks to engage with the deeper issue of what it means to sustain a folktale's cultural significance in a rapidly digitizing world.

Plotline of the Chethuang

As documented in the book *Tribal Folktales of Tripura* by D.K. Tyagi, the narrative of the folktale begins in a small village nestled atop a hill, a brother and sister lived with their family of five. They worked together in the jhum fields, tending to their crops and carrying out their daily chores. However, one day, as the siblings crossed a stream, the brother caught a glimpse of his sister's fair legs. He became mesmerized, his mind consumed by thoughts of her, and soon, he grew distracted, inattentive, and lost in daydreams. Seeing his unusual behavior, their grandmother asked what was troubling him, to which he responded with a smile when she said:

"Dida bai ano kainani hino
Lok Chethuang Lok"
"Phungsa tanmani phungba robokthwn
Tor Chethuang Tor" (Rangolee Debbarma
Official⁸)

"Thok banta de san
Khum banta de san."
(KOKTRIPURA
EXCLUSIVE⁷)

Grandmother asking
about grandson's desire
of getting married.
(trans. mine)

It was then that the family discovered his unsettling desire—he wished to marry his own sister. Shocked and horrified, they tried to change his mind, but despite their efforts, he remained firm in his decision. The family decided to accept his wish, though they kept the truth hidden from his sister. One day, as the sister went about her daily routine, she overheard her grandmother discussing the wedding preparations. The grandmother, mistaking the sound of the girl's hair clip for birds pecking at the paddy, unknowingly revealed the truth. Overwhelmed with shock and disgust, the girl sought solace from the shameful reality that awaited her. That night, she had a dream in which a goddess-like figure appeared before her. The deity advised her to seek out a small Chethuang tree, nurture it, and worship it. This, the deity said, would free her from her troubles. Determined to escape her fate, the girl set out the next morning, searching for the tree in the jhum fields. She spent hours looking for it, her heart weighed down by the burden of her family's expectations. Finally, she found a Chethuang sapling, took it at home, and planted it in a secluded corner of the field. Each day, she watered and worshipped the tree, and to everyone's amazement, it grew at an extraordinary rate. Her friends watched in wonder as the tree flourished whenever she sang to it. As the tree reached greater heights, she climbed onto its branches and sang

My parents want me to marry my brother.
Be tall, Chethuang, be tall.
If someone cuts you once, grow five times
bigger.
Be bigger, Chethuang, be bigger. (trans. mine)

Her parents, still determined to see her marry her brother, tried to cut the tree down. But with every stroke of the axe, the tree only grew taller. Desperate, they pleaded with their daughter to come down, promising they would no longer force her into marriage. Yet, she refused. The tree continued to ascend, its branches stretching towards the sky. It grew so tall that it eventually reached the clouds, allowing her to escape the world that had tried to bind her to an unacceptable fate.

Roots and Tradition: The Oral Legacy of Chethuang

The term roots⁹ can be interpreted as a nod to the past when storytelling was a fundamental part of

everyday life and the source of Indian folklore. These stories capture the customs, values, and beliefs that have been disseminated to the later epochs, illustrating the rich fabric of India's varied cultural history and social code (Chloe). The story acts as a forebearer of legacy and the written and digital medium of re-telling the story acts as a tribute towards the forefathers. Roots and traditions will most likely change with each passing generation but as a connector across divisions. They serve as a link between generations that will gain inspiration and meaning from this continuity. The idea of folklore, which William Thoms in 1846 (Liberman) defined, includes the collective culture of a given group regardless of time and place. Its

dynamic nature reflects the creativity and experiences of its practitioners, from rural to urban settings. The fluid tradition could perhaps be a product of human expression, integrating oral tradition, music and dance that transcends centuries. Folktales inherently offer diversity (Blank). Beyond the academic study it operates the role of an effective means for tackling social concerns and finding innovative solutions, highlighting its relevance and adaptability in today's world. These diverse forms foster social cohesion and transmit invaluable knowledge from one generation to the next, shaping our individual and collective identities.

The folktale of *Chethuang* is deeply rooted in the cultural memory of the Tripuri people, who might associate their collective identity with the narrative due to its spiritual and traditional significance. The tale reflects not only a belief system but also a way of life that probably holds meaning across generations. Storytelling, worldwide, occur within domestic spaces where elders, especially grandmothers, take on the role of cultural bearers. The grandmother in the household may often be the one who introduces the story of *Chethuang* to younger family members, using voice, gesture, and emotion to create a memorable experience. The folktale, being oral in nature, does not follow a fixed time-bound narration. The Panchatantra¹ stories,

popular among Bengali-speaking communities, are told without restriction to a particular time of day too. Rooted in moral and educational themes and frequently involving animal characters, these stories are especially suited for educational and nurturing value, ethics and morality to enhance communal sharing. These tales are suitable for all ages, making any time ideal for learning and communal engagement. This flexibility allows the story to be shared during everyday conversations or at any moment that feels right for the storyteller. It adds to its accessibility and adaptability. This may particularly benefit the speakers who find it easier to pass on the tale without constraints, allowing the storytelling to fit naturally into the rhythms of daily life. Similarly, there are no documented instances of temporal restrictions in the case of *Chethuang* too. This indicates a flexible performative tradition, adaptable to the needs of the community. It is perhaps on the convenience of the speaker and the listener to establish their space of sharing the story that is weaved through their community's heritage and legacy. The cultural importance of *Chethuang* may lie in how it connects the community to their land, their rituals, and their values. One of the most symbolic elements of the tale is the Chethuang tree, which is often regarded as a sacred presence and a symbol of well-being and peace.



Fig.1. Jora Ni Kok, YouTube, 2017¹⁰.

The image (Biswas and Roy) reflects the devotion of Photing towards the sacred tree, once shared through oral storytelling and preserved digitally in the contemporary era. It serves as a guiding principle within the community, where the act of worshipping the tree could be seen as a reflection of harmony between nature and human life. Over time, the next generation kids who inherited the tales becomes the next generation narrators, who passes on or carries their cultural heritage to their next torchbearers of the community legacy, keeping the story alive within the family and the larger community. Oral culture in this context may play a crucial role in transmitting cultural knowledge and values to the next generation. It offers a sense of

shared experience that written texts might not fully capture. The act of listening to a story being told by a familiar voice can create a deep emotional connection, which might help younger members understand the significance of their heritage more intimately. In the case of *Chethuang*, the story might not just inform but also emotionally engage, shaping the listener's understanding of identity, respect for nature, and communal bonds. Unlike written forms, oral narration allows for variation and personal touch, which might make the storytelling more relatable and impactful. The tale's continued presence in oral form also allows for the inclusion of new experiences, making it a living tradition that adapts over time. While the themes of

well-being, nature, and harmony remain central, the way the story is told may shift slightly depending on the storyteller's personal experiences or the needs of the audience. This ongoing process of narration and reinterpretation helps the story to stay relevant across different generations. For the Debbarma people, this might serve not only as a way to remember the past but also as a tool for understanding the present and shaping the future.

Power of the Written Words: Preserving Culture and Shaping Perspectives

The beating heart of cultural legacy is its oral traditions which thump with the rhythms of everlasting stories and common knowledge. These stories are likely to change over time, evolving to suit new contexts yet maintain their fundamental nature. When people adopt oral traditions, they become fully human and create relationships that cut over time and space. They navigate the future with a compass rooted in the past by bringing timeless wisdom into the present. This great legacy should be respected and treasured since it will serve as an inspiration for future generations (Brar). The shift from oral tradition to written

language is a critical turning point in the rich fabric of human storytelling. Stories have been spread through the ages, woven into the social fabric of communities, and carved through spoken tales into the collective consciousness since the beginning of civilization. In an edited volume *The Transmission of Oral Literature* examines similar common themes in several cultures, talking about how oral traditions change and persists in written form (Foley). But what gives these stories a fresh performance and power is the process of writing them down on the timeless medium of pen and paper. Because of their rich lore and enduring wisdom, Tripuri folktales have likewise enthralled audiences for generations. Once restricted to oral space, these tales gained fresh vitality and significance when they were recorded in written words. Dinesh K. Tyagi's seminal work, *Tribal Folktales of Tripura* could be viewed as an example of how the written word may contribute to the preservation and broader dissemination of folklore. With each stroke of the pen, he wrote down the voices of the past, helping these stories live on beyond memory and spoken words.



Fig.2. Kok Tripura Exclusive, YouTube, 2016¹¹.

For example, in the digital version of the Chethuang folktale, the girl asks her grandmother about the ongoing preparations in the family. The grandmother then pretends not to know anything. Later, when no one else is in the home, the girl hears her grandmother talking to herself while drying paddy in the courtyard, trying to keep the birds away. In her words, the grandmother unknowingly reveals that the paddy is being dried for the marriage of her grandson and daughter. The girl, who overhears this, immediately questions her grandmother about what she meant (Tyagi 3). This moment may point to a hidden act being planned within the family that is socially unacceptable. When told orally, this part of the story might carry a strong emotional impact, as the tone and pauses of the storyteller may reveal the tension and unspoken truth in the scene. When transcribed by Tyagi, the narrative is still present, showing that the story's deeper meaning is not lost even in written form. This moment might reflect the

internal struggles within families or communities, and the way silence or half-truths may cover actions that are considered wrong. It may also suggest how traditional stories carry lessons about the difference between what is socially right and socially wrong. This part of the tale might continue to hold cultural value, as it educates the community children about moral choices and the consequences of hidden actions within a shared social structure. When a story is written down, it transcends the limitations of time and space, reaching audiences far and wide, transcending the linguistic barriers and geographical boundaries. Furthermore, written records may also lend legitimacy and permanence to stories, allowing them to be studied, analyzed, and interpreted over time. The process of engaging with written folklore may encourage critical thinking, prompting readers to reflect on the cultural values embedded in these narratives. Even though writing has the power to bring big changes, some people still prefer oral tradition;

they believe that written texts take away the natural flow and spontaneity that comes with storytelling. Others even might lament the apparent downfall of oral culture in context to the globalization and technological innovation. These worries, meanwhile, ignore the collectively advantageous relation that exists between written and oral traditions (Shaheer). The interplay between oral and written spaces allows to harness their strengths to facilitate more dynamic and effective communication. This approach transcends the limitations of relying on a single medium, enabling richer exchanges and deeper understanding. Written spaces do not supplant oral traditions but rather amplify and preserve them, making them last longer. The shift from oral to written forms is a watershed moment in human history, turning transitory expressions into permanent narratives. Through the intermingling of oral and written spaces, the performative representation fortifies cultural inheritance, bridging the temporal gap between fleeting voice and enduring stories. This evolution enriches both mediums, fostering a more comprehensive means of preserving and sharing knowledge.

Digital Expression: Reviving Indigenous Oral Culture

In the changing scenario of cultural expression, the shift from oral tradition to the written word marked a crucial moment in the preservation and dissemination of indigenous folklore. Even though efforts were made to document these narratives in written form, there was a significant lag in their popularity compared to other models of cultural dissemination (Bernardino). As scholars like Brown and Nicholas point out, cultural heritage and historical narratives have gradually been at the center of scholarly interest, especially because of

increased cultural preservation (Brown & Nicholas). In the Tripuri folk tale, although specific stories may not have been theatered, but cinema has increasingly been employed to address the problems faced by indigenous communities and highlight the need to preserve their indigenous culture. With the advent of the digital era, telling stories has gone a step further into virtual space. These spaces such as social media platforms and video-sharing websites can potentially create new sites for performative representation. When narratives are transformed to any media platform, they are liable to changes that are subject to reinterpretation of historic narration in modern ways; thus, reframing the cultural tales by relocating the cultural oscillation of loss, by refixing the re-telling of the tale in digitalized forms. This change could identify the way that technology plays an influencing engagement and the communication of cultural heritage.

The digital adaptation of folk narratives can transform the reception, interaction and sharing of cultural tales among varied communities and its shift from orality to digital platforms offer new ways to preserve and circulate indigenous cultural narratives. For instance, as depicted in Fig. 3., the cinematic adaptation of Chethuang shows that the narrative not only maintains the thematic integrity of the story but also visually represents the cultural elements embedded within it. The use of traditional clothing, local customs, and marriage ritual helps root the narrative in the everyday life of the Debbarma people. By presenting these elements through the film, the cultural practices become more accessible to a wider audience, particularly through online platforms, where such content may reach viewers beyond regional and linguistic boundaries.



Fig.3. Kok Tripura Exclusive, YouTube, 2016¹².

Also, a key moment in the film occurs at timestamp 25:14 and 25:23, where the brother calls out to his sister, saying, "I am hungry. Come fast." The director's demarcation of the brother's male gaze towards Photing marks the point at which the brother begins to develop inappropriate feelings toward his sister—an act that sets the central conflict of the story into motion. This is projected through the screenshots of the two consecutive images given below.



Fig. 4. Kok Tripura Exclusive, YouTube, 2016¹³.



Fig. 5. Kok Tripura Exclusive, YouTube, 2016¹⁴.

In oral narration, this moment is often conveyed through the tone, hesitation, or expression of the storyteller, allowing listeners to infer the emotional complexity behind the dialogue. However, the images (Fig.4. and Fig. 5.) justifiably describe how the digital adaptation captures this moment through visual cues—camera angles, facial expressions, pauses, and the ambient setting—which might enhance the viewer's understanding and emotional engagement (Biswas and Roy). The audience may be able to imagine the sister's internal response and the significance of the moment more vividly than they could through oral narration as can be noted in the Fig. 6. The girl's emotional turmoil is conveyed not only through her tears but the background frame is evocative of her inner anguish. The fiery hearth is a visual representation of her intense emotional pain that is consuming her from within. Her emotions and her consciousness are going through a contradictory debate as reflected in the subtitle where she says that she is unable to "tolerate" the family pressure and her mind seems to "burn completely". This setting mirrors the grief she feels inside. Such a connection makes it easier for viewers to understand her emotions directly by watching the scene.

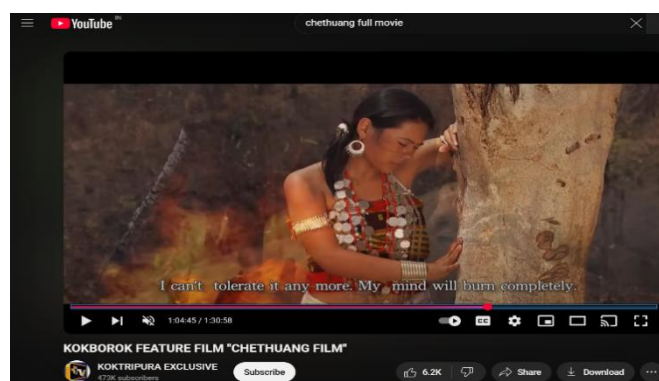


Fig. 6. Kok Tripura Exclusive, YouTube, 2016¹⁵.

Nevertheless, the transition to digital media may also bring certain distortions. In oral traditions, the storyteller may adapt the pacing or emotional intensity depending on the listeners' reactions, allowing space for moral reflection and communal interpretation. In contrast, a digital adaptation fixes the narrative into a particular visual form, where

the directorial authority shapes the script as per his framework but here the director has to be careful to represent the cultural narratives as per the need of the Debbarma community so that nothing is misrepresented. Cultural appropriation, if overlooked may lead to cultural dissimulation. While preserving a tale in digitalized version,

cultural assimilation and dissimilation has to be appropriated by the community to accept the narrative that shall be re-told to the next generation. Cultural sensitivity cannot be overlooked in any artform for the sake of preservation. As a result, viewers may interpret the scene based on how it is framed visually, which might limit alternative readings that oral versions typically allow. Despite this, the digital format remains significant in this context, as it enables audiences—particularly younger generations more accustomed to visual media—to connect with the story in an immediate and immersive way. This suggests that virtual adaptations, while not without limitations, may offer powerful means of engaging with indigenous stories and preserving their relevance in contemporary cultural discourse.

Film adaptations, visual media and digital storytelling might introduce this as a method for cultural preservation as stories became more accessible to the masses, their reach no longer bound by territorial confines. One of the main ways that digital adaptation can change conventional storytelling is through the perception of audiences. Stuart Hall's representation theory (1997) argues that representation is an active process which builds cultural meaning and is not a reflection of an already existing reality. In Tripuri culture, digital adaptation of folklore can offer a stage for reinterpretation and reimagining of traditional stories as can be observed in the folktale *Chethuang* in different narrative spaces mentioned in the above sections. Audiences, who may have previously known these stories in particular communal contexts, can now experience them in diverse digital forms, shaping how they interpret and absorb these stories (Hall). The availability of digital media allows people from various cultural backgrounds to engage with Tripuri folklore, which can be a factor in its changing meaning over time. Also, digital storytelling can improve audience interaction by making it more interactive and immersive. Unlike oral narration, in which interaction is mostly limited to listening passively, digital versions might include visual, audio, and text-based components that stimulate active participation. Judith Butler's theory of performativity¹⁶ argues that cultural identities are constituted through repetitive performances (Butler). In this regard, digital storytelling could be viewed as a performative act that can make cultural tales change constantly via various forms of interaction. Furthermore, digital adaptation can influence cultural transmission by making wider and more uniform access to traditional tales possible. The swift growth of digital platforms can create a new arena for indigenous groups to express their cultural identities, rendering

traditional tales more accessible globally. Michel Foucault's theory of power and discourse¹⁷ (1972) can be interpreted as indicating that digital media can not only reflect but also construct culture by deciding what can be made visible and accessible (Foucault). In the context of Tripuri folktale, digital media can provide a platform to subvert mainstream cultural narratives by providing a platform to indigenous voices and viewpoints. The virtual environment creates a feeling of continuity and adjustment, as old tales are reinterpreted in new contexts.

In contrast to static oral traditions, digital storytelling can offer room for innovation while preserving cultural content. This dynamic process can support Hall's contention that meaning is not static but is constantly produced and re-produced through representation. The folktale *Chethuang* exemplifies this fluidity, having moved from oral performance within the Debbarma community to its visual representation in contemporary media. Traditionally conveyed by elders—particularly grandmothers—the tale was passed down across generations through voice, expression, and situational context, allowing for subtle modifications in tone and detail while preserving its cultural and moral framework. This shift underscores the primary objective of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. As intergenerational oral transmission becomes less frequent, digital adaptations offer a means of sustaining cultural memory. The transformation of *Chethuang* across mediums not only protects the narrative from erasure but also recontextualizes it for contemporary audiences, ensuring its continued relevance. In doing so, the story's moral dimensions and cultural significance are not merely retained but made accessible within new interpretive frameworks, reinforcing the central role of preservation through adaptive storytelling.

From Oral to Visual: Cinematic Journey of the Folktale *Chethuang*

The cinematic adaptation of the Tripuri folktale *Chethuang* presents an interesting insight into the legacy of oral traditions in indigenous culture. This age-old folktale, orally transmitted across generations, continue to be an integral part of the collective identity and cultural heritage of the Tripuri people. The shift of *Chethuang* from a traditional oral form to digital platform is a reflection of the dynamic nature of storytelling, allowing these tales to survive and flourish even in modern times. The cinematic adaptation of *Chethuang*, directed by Kamal Kalai, makes the spirit of Tripuri folklore accessible to a wider audience. Released in 2016 under the patronage of Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council¹⁸ (TTAADC), this film work accentuates the

importance of storytelling in the preservation of cultural heritage and the promotion of communal identity. By adapting this folktale to a digital platform, this project ensures that it remains relevant for future generation while expanding its reach beyond local audiences (Shaheer). Aside its artistic merit, *Chethuang* also has an educational value, offering a glimpse into the traditions, rituals and beliefs of the Tripuri. For example, the folktale conveys moral teachings that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Tyagi, in the printed version captures a striking incident where the brother is shown to have developed an unusual feeling just by seeing the half-exposed legs of his sister. This incident has also been captured by Kamal Kalai where he frames a freezing moment of the brother that made the brother dream an incestuous desire to marry his own sister, as can be seen in the Fig. 7. Although such a relationship is socially unacceptable, the family supports the brother's wish. This scenario can be interpreted as the patriarchal supremacy that prevails within the community where the male's voice is given preference in the family by suppressing the female voice, where even unacceptable societal actions receive family approval. This moral depth is further reinforced through the collaborative efforts that shaped the film's production and outreach. This collaboration highlights the significance of community involvement in cultural sustainability, illustrating the interdependence of art and society. The film can also contribute to increased tourism and economic prospects in Tripura by drawing tourists interested in experiencing the cultural diversity presented on screen. This emphasizes the region's traditions and natural beauty; thereby making *Chethuang* a powerful marketing instrument, promoting cultural discovery and aiding local communities. Not only does digital media facilitate broader accessibility, but it also opens up new channels for interacting with traditional narratives. The study of *Chethuang* is a prime example of how indigenous stories can evolve to fit the digital era without losing their fundamental nature. Through this examination the study seeks to highlight the power of digital media in maintaining folktales, particularly the intricacies of cultural adaptation. As theory of representation

posits, presentation style influences interpretation and reception (Hall). Therefore, Chethuang is not only a movie but a testament to the strength of storytelling in bringing people together, inspiring generations, and keeping heritage alive. The adaptation highlights the need to develop new storytelling methods to protect cultural traditions so that they can stay alive and open to an ever-changing world.

The adaptation of Chethuang into a digital platform reflects the broader role of technology in preserving and promoting intangible cultural heritage. Through digital storytelling, the folktale becomes accessible to a wider global audience without losing its cultural essence. The use of visual, auditory and performative elements in the cinematic version allows the narrative to reach beyond the limitations of oral transmission. As noted by Bernardino, digitization enhances the accessibility of cultural heritage, making stories like *Chethuang* available across geographical and linguistic boundaries. These digital repositories become crucial in preserving folklore that might otherwise be lost. Indian storytelling, often conveyed through songs, chats and performances, benefits from the digital medium by reaching wider audiences while maintaining its performative richness. In this way, the digital preservation of Chethuang not only protects a specific cultural narrative but also reinforces the broader commitment to sustaining indigenous knowledge systems in an increasingly connected world.

Conclusion

The paper has examined the transmission of the Tripuri folktale Chethuang across oral, written and digital mediums with a particular emphasis on the role of preservation in each phase. This transition finally to digital storytelling demonstrates how traditional knowledge systems adapt to changing technological landscapes while holding onto their cultural essence. At the heart of this study is the understanding that preservation is not merely about documentation but also about maintaining the narrative's oral spirit, meanings and social functions as reflected through a note shared by the director at the end of the movie Chethuang.

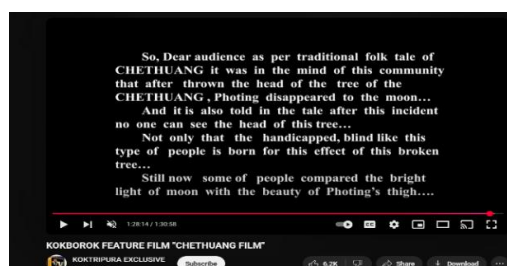


Fig. 7. Kok Tripura Exclusive, YouTube, 2016²⁰.

This note where the director directly addresses the audience is significant in order to understand the myths circulated within the community. The sacred tree endowed with mysterious power to control the patriarchal domination sets not only an example for the community but generates a discourse that binds people within the boundaries of norms and regulation set by the elderly people. Thus, when the elderly people narrate the tale, the tree becomes a symbolic representation of keeping the people within the society's established boundaries that is circulated through the tale across generations. Hence, this message helps the younger generation to understand the embedded societal message coded within the story. In the context of a rapidly changing society, where traditional customs and narratives are increasingly overlooked by younger people, such films serve to reintroduce and recontextualize cultural values. The director is not only presenting a story through visual media but is also engaging in cultural preservation. He connects the past with the present in a way that is culturally appropriate by relocating the viewers to visit the tales of the "once a time"²¹ framework. This helps young viewers to visualize these stories not only as agents of myths or old sayings, but as treasures of valuable lessons and cultural symbols that matters even in the contemporary era. Furthermore, the note draws attention of the audience where the sister's thigh adds a metaphoric value by comparing it to the moonlight. Though this comparison may appear unusual, it is meaningful within the narrative. The moon is commonly associated with beauty, serenity, and radiance. By comparing her thigh to the moonlight, the text attributes her a kind of transcendent or otherworldly beauty. Perhaps, the protection provided by the *Chethuang* was already established through the cosmic otherworldly connection, suggestive within the text since the ancient times. This comparison also suggests that her physical appearance holds a certain power—one capable of disrupting conventional thought, as seen in the emotional conflict experienced by her brother. Photing's disappearance from earth is indicative of her escape to the otherworld that finally awakens the community's consciousness. The head of the *Chethuang* not to be seen by the community people is indicative of the fact that whenever they will cross their boundary, the cosmic energy will move their head away from the mortal beings. The *Chethuang* becomes a protective agent and marker of communal unity to carry the message to the next generations. Overall, the film engages with themes of emotion, belief, and the influence of physical beauty. Myths that the director felt cannot be

emotionally evocated through the frames has been communicated through notes. This is also a mode of narrating facts that are embedded within the community and re-told by the director. The cultural representation is depicted carefully by the director so that the representational content does not convey meanings misunderstood by the audience which may culturally trigger sensitive issues. These elements are not confined to a specific time or place but continue to resonate across generations. In this way, the director is helping to keep cultural heritage alive. He is showing how important it is to protect and respect these old beliefs while also giving them a new place in the 21st century. This is how traditions are kept alive by retelling them in ways that today's generation can feel, understand, relate and narrate to the next generation.

The paper shows that despite certain narrative shifts and distortions that naturally occur through different mediums, the core storyline of the folktale remain intact. This continuity ensures that younger generations are still able to access, learn and engage with the story in ways that are relevant to their time. The digital adaptation, in particular, extends the reach of the folktale far beyond the boundaries of oral communities. Digital media, with its audio-visual and performative capacities, make it possible to replicate the communal and participatory aspects of oral storytelling, while also ensuring permanence and easy distribution. This development addresses many critical issues surrounding cultural preservation, such as the risk of language loss, fading traditional knowledge, and the marginalization of indigenous voices. The digital platform also opens up opportunities for cultural exchange, research, and education, contributing to the recognition and appreciation of regional narratives in a global context. Furthermore, the paper emphasizes that preservation efforts must be carried out with ethical responsibility. The role of community involvement, access to technological resources, and protection against cultural appropriation are essential in making preservation meaningful and sustainable. By tracing how *Chethuang* has evolved yet endured across forms, the study underlines the importance of respecting narrative integrity while embracing the innovative potential of digital storytelling, ensuring that cultural heritage remains active, visible, and relevant in a constantly changing world where indigenous narratives continue to serve as tools of memory, identity, and intergenerational connection.

Endnotes

¹ It is a famous ancient Indian collection of moral

stories and fables. These are mostly about animals and are meant to teach lessons about life, practical wisdom and moral values in a simple and engaging way.

² It celebrates the devotion of Savitri who saved her husband from death. In this festival the married women observe a fast and worship the banyan tree praying for their husbands' longevity. It also signifies marital fidelity, strength, and the power of a devoted wife's love and prayers.

³ This tale is found in the third- book of Forest of the Mahabharata epic that talks about a princess named Savitri who showed her unwavering devotion as she bravely follows her husband Satyaban even after his death. Confronting Yama, the God of Death with wisdom and faith, she secures Satyavan's life- symbolizing the triumph of love, sacrifice, and determined will over fate.

⁴ This study documents specifically to the Chethuang folktale narrated within the domestic life of the of Hindu Debbarmas. The narrative and its associated practices are rooted solely in the spiritual and ritualistic framework of Hindu culture practiced by the Debbarmas. The paper did not include the voice of the Debbarmas who adopted Christianity.

⁵ The 'horizon of expectation' introduced by Hans Robert Jauss, a Reader Response critic, refers to the framework through which a reader can decode and interpret the text, based on the cultural and historical experiences.

⁶ It is a popular news and entertainment channel based in Agartala-Khumulwng, Tripura. It features true stories, underground documentaries, interviews and cultural content from Tripura. With 473k subscribers and over 192 million views, it aims to build a better Tripura by sharing authentic local voices.

⁷ These lines are taken from the movie Chethuang, used as dialogue at the timestamp of 58:09 in the video uploaded by the KOKTRIPURA EXCLUSIVE YouTube channel in 2016.

⁸ These lines, used as dialogues are taken from the full video of Chethuang at the timestamp 37:33, uploaded on YouTube by the channel named Rangolee Debbarma Official.

⁹ It refers to the origins or foundational aspects of cultural identity, particularly the traditional practices and values like storytelling that shaped and sustained Indian folklore across generations.

¹⁰ The girl worshipping the sapling of the Chethuang tree in order to get rid from the emotional turmoil she was going through. (The image is taken from YouTube as a screenshot from a song clip as this shot was not used in the cinematic adaptation of Chethuang.)

¹¹ It shows the scene where the grandmother was talking to herself about the marriage of her

grandchildren as she mistook the sound of girl's hair clip with the sound of birds. (Screenshot taken from the movie at a timestamp of 1:02:26).

¹² The screenshot from the movie depicts how traditional culture, practices, and rituals are being preserved and visually represented through the celebration of Garia puja by the characters in the narrative.

¹³ It is the scene where the brother watches his sister washing her face and hands with water. The use of the proper camera angle toward the sister indicates the initial moment of the brother's infatuation towards her.

¹⁴ This image portrays how after the initial glance, the brother looks away and tries to distract himself by telling his sister to come quickly as he needs to eat.

¹⁵ This screenshot from the movie shows the emotional conflict and inner turmoil the girl experiences after hearing the news of her marriage with her own brother. The image of fiery background is used to visually emphasize the intensity of this painful and challenging moment for the audience.

¹⁶ In Judith Butler's book Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990), she implies that identity is not inherent but something that we constantly construct through repeated behaviors, actions and expressions. These performances determine the way gender, culture, and identity come to be understood within society over time.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault's concept of power and discourse posits that knowledge and culture are constructed by those who determine what is seen and accessible. In case of Tripuri folktales, digital media can subvert mainstream narratives by giving voice to indigenous people, enabling them to construct cultural representation and visibility.

¹⁸ It is an autonomous organization within Tripura, established under the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution for safeguarding tribal rights and culture. It exercises legislative, executive and financial jurisdiction over subjects such as land administrations and local self-government. TTAAC is responsible for the preservation of tribal identity and advancement.

²⁰ This screenshot captures a note presented at the end of the movie, where it is mentioned that the Chethuang tree is still believed to hold sacred value. It also states that the beauty of the girl's thigh is often compared to the beauty of the moonlight.

²¹ When the narrator is narrating a story; they often have a tendency to begin it with the phrase "once upon a time" in order to immortalize the story as they are not aware of the exact time frame of the narrative.

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