
Before the Last Voice Falls Silent

How the priceless oral heritage of the Northeast is being preserved and promoted

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We live in an era of obsessive documentation, capturing every moment on phone, camera and social media. Yet in Assam and the rest of Northeast India, some of humanity's most profound knowledge systems in languages, rituals and oral epics exist with no documentation whatsoever. They survive only through word of mouth, from elder to child, existing entirely in human memory. This is the paradox of our hyperconnected age where we record the trivial while the profound remains vulnerable to erasure.

The Predicament

In Assam, oral traditions carry stories, songs and knowledge passed down through generations. From the ojapali performers who narrate mythological tales through songs and movement to the Mising community's Oi Ni:tom folk songs, much of that cultural memory lives through people rather than books.

Assam's oral traditions are more than just stories. They are repositories of agricultural knowledge, history, healing, spirituality and social memory.



Dakar bachan, a collection of agricultural and social maxims attributed to the legendary sage Dak, includes observations on seasons, weather and farming. Bihu songs carry tales of love and community life, while aai naam is about devotional healing practices and malita preserves narratives of legends.

In traditions such as Ojapali and Bhaona, stories, music and performance come together to transmit mythology, values and collective memory from one generation to another.

In Sikkim, among the Lepcha community, when drought threatens the land, shamans invoke Mount Kanchanjunga through the sacred Puntongpuli flute. Its melody is a prayer that is learnt through years of practice. Similar practices persist across the region, including oral epics in Nagaland, Khasi songs in Meghalaya and Apatani knowledge in Arunachal Pradesh.

The Promise

But these traditions can't be captured in words or visuals. One has to witness them to explore their uniqueness. In Assam, the Deodhani tradition is a combination of ritual, dance and spiritual belief and involves a learned man or deodhani entering into a trance during ceremonies. It's said he acts as an intermediary between the human and the spirit world. Witnessing this ritual is an experience of a living tradition where belief, music, movement and sacred knowledge come together.

At the Myoko festival in Ziro Valley, Arunachal Pradesh, the Apatani community gathers each spring to celebrate fertility and renewal. At the heart of the ceremony is the nyibu or the shaman, reciting ancient invocations. It's said he mediates between the human world and the spirits of the forest and field. To sit beside him as he chants and to watch the community respond with reverence, is to understand something no documentary can convey.

The Preservation

Fortunately, a quiet movement is taking shape to preserve these practices. The Mising Agom Kébang, an organisation preserving the local tradition of the community, has played an important role in keeping the Mising language and oral traditions alive in Assam. The organisation tries to ensure that younger Misings practice their traditions not only at home but also in creative spaces.

For the Hrusso Aka community in Arunachal, NGOs like Riwatch are documenting folktales and words, while the Aka Language Academy has developed a primer to teach the language to younger generations. In Sikkim, organisations like the Sikkim Lepcha Youth Association are actively promoting the transmission of rituals and language, ensuring the knowledge of the Pawo and Bongthing resonates with the youth.