

Visual documentation and design intervention for safeguarding the living heritage of the Gond community of Telangana

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The "Design Innovation Centre" at the Department of Design, IITH, aims to design and develop a virtual cultural heritage repository of the traditional craft and art practices of the tribal communities of Telangana. Our current work is focused on documenting the tangible and intangible living heritage of the various tribes inhabiting the state. Documenting the built architecture of Telangana is another key focus of our research. In India, scientific tools for scanning and quantitative assessment of culture and heritage are still limited to documentation for archival purposes. An attempt at digital preservation and virtual recreation is a step towards future-proofing our roots. We aim to develop a digital repository of the state's cultural heritage by embedding advanced technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) in heritage preservation. Briefs on the ongoing project to safeguard cultural heritage are given below.

Safeguarding the Tangible and Intangible Heritage of Telangana

Regarding historical importance and the current population, the Gond tribe, a noted tribe of Telangana, has become a state heritage. The ongoing project seeks to research and document the cultural heritage of the tribe, their current practices, crafts and rituals and the oral repertoire. It also aims to use design intervention techniques and processes to preserve the heritage and provide suitable platforms for recognising and uplifting the rich culture of the tribe.



With every passing decade, their landscapes are altered, and despite our best efforts, heritage deteriorates. With the passing of every generation, the links to their sociocultural memories diminish. Skilled artisans who lack patronage encourage their children to take up modern-day professions, leading to venerable art and craft forms' death. Perhaps the only way to ensure that all knowledge is not lost to time is by documenting them.

The major tasks were completed under the project.

- An inventory of all the artefacts found through documentation
- Recording oral histories to understand the intangible cultural heritage
- Identify methods to safeguard the cultural heritage
- Involving the traditional bearers and practitioners by participatory action research
- Interpretation of the customs and characteristics in the virtual museum

This project enabled users to access information on all aspects of their heritage by making it possible to discover, study, and understand the cultural treasures of Telangana and essential historical documents in a variety of ways, such as museum spaces, kiosks, digital portals (webpage) and educational content disseminated through partnerships with academic institutions.



Figure 1: Rituals at Nagoba Jatra



Figure 2: Community members attending a pen worship at Indravelly



Figure 3: Pradhans performing musical instruments at Nagoba Jatra



Figure 4: Community members performing a ritual at Duradi



Figure 5: Screenshot showing details of the Dhokra artefacts in the Virtual Gond Museum



Figure 6: Screenshot showing the Cultural artefact in the Virtual Gond Museum

Design Intervention Workshop with Ojha craftsmen

The Design Intervention workshop aimed at safeguarding the Dhokra crafts of the Ojha Gonds Community was held at Kala Ashram, Adilabad. The workshop was conducted as a part of the Ongoing Project “Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Telangana under the Supervision of the Project instructor, Prof Deepak John Mathew.

Ten Ojha artisan families of Chitalbori and Rampur Belsari villages from the Adilabad region participated in the workshop. The traditional artefacts, along with new forms and designs, were created by the artisans using the traditional metal casting methods used by the Ojha community. The workshop also had an objective of community building, peer learning, skill development and training. Thus, the Master craftsman was chosen from the Ojha Community itself. Master craftsman shared his craft expertise with the community's peer artisans. The workshop was intended to revive the traditional “Wojari Kala” (literally translates art of the Ojha Community) and encourage younger generations of the ojha families to adapt to the traditional occupation by providing design intervention through the workshop; the artisans could create products which can fulfil the market's needs; thus, their traditional crafts can provide sustainable livelihood to the Community.

Through the workshop, we tried to bridge the gap between traditional artisans and current market practices. The workshop aimed to achieve holistic development of the artisans and to provide sustainable livelihood opportunities to the tribal artisans. Tangible and Intangible Heritage of Telangana is a project with immense possibilities and a vast area to cover regarding documentation. The project is opening more prospects for tangible and intangible cultural heritage and ways to safeguard the rich cultural heritage of Gonds. This study will provide a path to protecting the cultural heritage and traditions of other tribal cultures. The framework established and implemented in this project can be adapted to document and safeguard cultural heritage in different regions of India.

Moreover, the workshops conducted for skill development and upliftment of traditional tribal crafts practice provide a sustainable livelihood system for the artisans of tribal communities. It is a need of an hour to safeguard the living practices of the artisans; through this project, we tried to establish a bridge between the current markets and local artisanal methods, which can be a significant step in safeguarding living traditions and indigenous knowledge.

Figure 7: Diagram showing the key aspects of the Dhokra crafts and its significance in the Gond Society



Figure 8: Ojha artisans and Design team from IITH at workshop site in Adilabad



Figure 9: Ojha artisans creating products with the wax coils for Dhokra casting during the workshop

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