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Exploring Storytelling as a Praxis of Self-Determination Among Adivasi Communities in Rural West Bengal

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Abstract

This paper investigates the transformative potential of digital storytelling (DST) as a medium for Adivasi communities in rural West Bengal to articulate their subjectivities and challenge dominant narratives of marginalization (Rodriguez, 2001). Framed within a sociological perspective of social exclusion and adverse inclusion, the study posits that the historical dispossession of tribal peoples from their land, resources, and governance has resulted in a profound "voicelessness" within the national discourse (Xaxa, 2017). We argue that DST, when implemented through a participatory and ethically grounded methodology (Christen, 2012; Wilson, 2008), can function as a counter-hegemonic praxis, enabling communities to reclaim their narratives, assert cultural sovereignty, and articulate their lived experiences of development-induced displacement and state neglect (Xaxa, 2018). This paper outlines a detailed methodological blueprint for a qualitative, participatory action research project in the tribal-dominated districts of West Bengal (Gubrium et al., 2016). It proposes an analytical framework combining narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), thematic analysis (de Jager et al., 2017), and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) to interpret the digital stories produced. By examining hypothetical findings related to cultural identity, land alienation, and gendered experiences, the paper concludes that the value of DST extends beyond mere amplification (Lundby, 2019), fostering internal processes of critical consciousness (Teti et al., 2016), digital agency (de Jager et al., 2017), and community solidarity (Gubrium et al., 2016), thereby representing a crucial step towards digital self-determination (Xaxa, 2022).

Keywords: Adivasi Communities, Rural West Bengal, Digital Storytelling, Community

Governance, Data Sovereignty

1.0 Introduction: The Problem of Adivasi 'Voicelessness'

The post-colonial Indian state, in its pursuit of national integration and development, has paradoxically engendered a systemic silencing of its most ancient inhabitants, the Adivasi peoples (Xaxa, 2008). This condition of 'voicelessness' is not an inherent trait of tribal societies but a manufactured outcome of historical processes that have systematically dismantled their autonomy, alienated them from their lands, and rendered their worldviews peripheral to the national imaginary (Xaxa, 2017). Previous work has documented this phenomenon in regions like Jharkhand, where despite constitutional protections under the Fifth Schedule, the voices of tribal communities are conspicuously absent in the enactment of laws that directly impact their lives and livelihoods (Xaxa, 2017). This paper extends that analysis to the context of West Bengal, a state with a significant tribal population—numbering 5,296,953, or 5.79% of the state's total according to the 2011 Census—yet where their perspectives remain largely excluded from mainstream media and policy discourses (Patra et al., 2021; Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2014). The Indian media landscape, dominated by upper-caste leadership, provides negligible space for Adivasi journalists or issues, reinforcing their invisibility and perpetuating hegemonic misrepresentations (Anand, 2005; Oxfam India, 2022).

In this context of structured exclusion, the emergence of new media technologies presents both a challenge and an opportunity (Dutta, 2016). Digital Storytelling (DST) is introduced here not as a technologically determinist solution, but as a potential political and cultural intervention (Hessler & Lambert, 2017; Meyerhofer-Parra et al., 2024). DST, which merges the rich oral traditions of indigenous communities with accessible digital tools like smartphones, offers a medium through which these communities can potentially bypass the traditional gatekeepers of information—the state and corporate media—to represent themselves on their own terms (Wilson & Stewart, 2008; First Nations Development Institute, n.d.). It provides a platform for articulating lived experiences that are otherwise flattened or ignored by official statistics and dominant development narratives (Gubrium et al., 2016).

This study, therefore, is animated by a central research question: *How, and to what extent, does the practice of community-led digital storytelling enable rural Adivasi communities in West Bengal*

to articulate their lived experiences, reclaim their cultural identities, and challenge dominant narratives of marginalization and development? By proposing a rigorous methodological framework, this paper aims to explore DST not merely as a communication tool, but as a praxis of empowerment and a contemporary expression of the Adivasi struggle for self-determination (Xaxa, 2022; Lundby, 2019).

2.0 Theoretical Framework: The Political Economy of Adivasi Silence

To comprehend the potential of digital storytelling, one must first locate the Adivasi subject within the political and economic structures that have historically produced their silence (Xaxa, 2008). This requires a critical sociological framework that moves beyond simplistic notions of backwardness and isolation, instead focusing on the historical processes of dispossession and the contested nature of development (Nathan & Xaxa, 2012).

2.1 From Autonomy to 'Adverse Inclusion'

The conceptualization of tribes in India has long been predicated on their geographical and social isolation from the larger society (Xaxa, 1999). In the pre-colonial era, this isolation was synonymous with autonomy; tribes exercised sovereign control over their territories, governing themselves through their own laws, traditions, and customs regarding land, forest, and other resources (Xaxa, 2008). The colonial period marked a violent rupture in this arrangement (Xaxa, 2011). The British administration, through conquest and annexation, forcibly incorporated tribal territories into the colonial state, superimposing alien legal and administrative structures that dismantled traditional forms of governance (Xaxa, 2008). This process of integration was, however, deeply paradoxical (Nathan & Xaxa, 2012). As argued in previous works, it constituted a form of "adverse inclusion," whereby inclusion into the larger political and economic system was predicated on their exclusion from their own resources and decision-making authority (Nathan & Xaxa, 2012; Xaxa, 2008). The introduction of private property rights and landlordism facilitated the massive transfer of land from tribes to non-tribal moneylenders, traders, and zamindars, a process often abetted by a collusive local administration (Xaxa, 2011). Thus, tribes were integrated into the state as subjects and labourers, but simultaneously excluded from their position as owners and governors of their own domains (Xaxa, 2008).

2.2 The Paradox of 'Development' and Dispossession

This logic of adverse inclusion did not end with independence; it was, in fact, accelerated under the banner of national development (Xaxa, 2008). The post-colonial state, while instituting protective legislation and affirmative action programs, simultaneously pursued a model of development that has been fundamentally "coercive" for Adivasi communities (Xaxa, 2018). Large-scale development projects—dams, mines, industrial plants, and wildlife sanctuaries—have been disproportionately located in tribal areas, leading to mass displacement and the further alienation of land and forest resources (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2014). It is estimated that while constituting less than 8% of India's population, tribes have accounted for over 40% of those displaced by such projects, with abysmal rates of rehabilitation (Xaxa, 2011). This state-led development model, justified by the rhetoric of "national interest," has systematically undermined the very resource base upon which tribal livelihoods and cultures depend, offsetting any marginal gains from welfare schemes (Xaxa, 2011; Nathan & Xaxa, 2012). The Adivasi experience of the modern Indian state is thus defined by this profound contradiction: the promise of inclusion through reservation and welfare is perpetually negated by the reality of exclusion through dispossession (Xaxa, 2001).

2.3 The Struggle for Self-Determination and Voice

The historical trajectory of dispossession forms the backdrop for the contemporary Adivasi struggle for rights, dignity, and self-determination (Xaxa, 2022). Movements such as the Pathalgadi movement in Jharkhand are not anti-constitutional, as often portrayed, but are democratic assertions for the realization of constitutional rights to self-governance that the state has failed to implement (Xaxa, 2019). These movements represent a deep-seated aspiration to reclaim the autonomy that was systematically dismantled through the process of adverse inclusion (Xaxa, 2008). This struggle is fundamentally about regaining control over their institutions, ways of life, and economic development, as articulated in international frameworks like the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, to which India is a signatory.

Within this context, the act of storytelling assumes a potent political dimension (Bell, 2020). The loss of territorial sovereignty was accompanied by a loss of narrative sovereignty; Adivasi reality came to be defined by outsiders—the colonial administrator, the nationalist planner, the mainstream journalist—who constructed them as primitive, backward, and an obstacle to progress (Dutta, 2016; Xaxa, 1999). Therefore, the act of an Adivasi community creating and disseminating

its own stories through a medium like DST is more than an exercise in communication (Lundby, 2019). It is a micro-political act of reclaiming sovereignty (Christen, 2012). It functions as a form of digital Pathalgadi—a symbolic demarcation of narrative territory, asserting the right to self-representation and self-determination in the face of historical erasure (Xaxa, 2019). It is a contemporary, technological expression of the same fundamental struggle for autonomy that has defined Adivasi resistance for centuries (Wilson & Stewart, 2008).

3.0 Digital Storytelling as a Counter-Hegemonic Praxis

The academic and activist literature on digital storytelling, particularly within indigenous contexts, positions it not as a neutral technology but as a methodology aligned with decolonial and participatory paradigms (Christen, 2012; Wilson, 2008). It is seen as a means to challenge hegemonic narratives and foster community empowerment from the ground up (Rodriguez, 2001).

3.1 Principles of Indigenous Digital Storytelling

Indigenous digital storytelling is fundamentally about bridging ancestral traditions with contemporary tools (First Nations Development Institute, n.d.; Storii, 2024). It honors the centrality of oral traditions in cultural preservation and intergenerational knowledge transfer while leveraging the accessibility of digital media like video, audio, and photography (Battiste, 2002; Wilson, 2008). The practice is often youth-focused, empowering younger generations with technical skills while facilitating collaboration with elders, thereby mending fractures caused by historical trauma and assimilationist policies (Storii, 2024). More than just documenting the past, these projects are seen as vital tools for cultural resurgence, allowing communities to articulate their identities, advocate for their rights, and ensure their narratives endure in a digital world (Christen, 2012; Flinn et al., as cited in Sajjad, 2024). The emphasis is on stories that are personal, authentic, knowledgeable, and relatable, reflecting the lived realities of the community (First Nations Development Institute, n.d.; Hessler & Lambert, 2017).

3.2 Empowering Voices, Shaping Futures

Numerous studies have demonstrated the efficacy of DST in amplifying the voices of marginalized communities (de Jager et al., 2017; Botfield et al., 2017). By providing a platform for self-expression, DST enables individuals and groups to move from being objects of research to active subjects and legitimate knowers of their own circumstances (Peterson et al., 2012). This process

can foster empathy in external audiences and mobilize collective action around critical issues like climate change, social justice, and public health (Dahlstrom, 2014; Wang & Yeh, 2020). A key concept in this domain is "re-storying," where communities use digital tools to rewrite and reclaim narratives that have been historically shaped by dominant, often colonial, perspectives (Bell, 2020). This act of telling one's own truth is seen as crucial not only for achieving a measure of historical justice but, more importantly, for empowering communities with a sense of agency over their own representation and future (Bell, 2020; Wilson & Stewart, 2008).

3.3 Ethical Imperatives: Community Governance and Data Sovereignty

The application of digital media in indigenous contexts is fraught with significant ethical risks that mirror historical patterns of exploitation (Christen, 2012). The very real danger exists that digital platforms can become new conduits for knowledge extraction, cultural appropriation, and the misrepresentation of sacred or sensitive information (Christen, 2012; Sajjad, 2024). The history of Adivasi communities in India is one of extractive appropriation—of their land, forests, minerals, and labor (Xaxa, 2018; Nathan & Xaxa, 2012). Consequently, a research methodology that engages with their cultural knowledge must be consciously structured to resist this historical logic (Kovach, 2009).

Ethical practice in DST, therefore, must transcend the standard institutional requirements of informed consent (Sustainability Directory, 2024). It demands a decolonial methodology rooted in principles of community governance and data sovereignty (Christen, 2012). This means adhering to frameworks like the OCAP® principles (Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession), which assert that the community retains full authority over their stories and the data they contain, from production to dissemination (Christen, 2012). This approach challenges the extractive, transactional practices of conventional research by emphasizing relationality, mutual care, and the reinforcement of community-led protocols (Escobar, 2018, as cited in DRS, 2025). In this framework, the research process itself becomes a form of reparative action, actively working to dismantle the very power dynamics that have historically marginalized Adivasi communities (Wilson, 2008). The methodology is not just a means to an end; it is an ethical and political commitment to non-extractive engagement (Kovach, 2009).

4.0 Methodology: A Critical Inquiry into Documented Narratives

To move beyond the dominant epistemic frames that have long characterized Tribal Studies in India, this study deliberately rejected conventional extractive research models. Such approaches have historically treated tribal societies as passive objects of study, perpetuating a crude form of epistemological fanaticism that neutralizes non-caste worldviews and reinforces narratives of backwardness. It was therefore imperative to adopt a methodology that, while grounded in the analysis of secondary sources, was animated by a commitment to centering Adivasi subjectivity and lived experience as the primary unit of analysis. This study was consequently designed as a critical narrative inquiry, seeking to understand the processes of social exclusion and adverse inclusion not as abstract statistics, but as they are articulated and contested in documented narratives from and about Adivasi communities in West Bengal.

4.1 Corpus and Data Sourcing

This study constructed a diverse corpus of secondary materials, systematically sourced to capture the dialectic between dominant discourses and Adivasi self-representation. The geographical focus was maintained on the tribal-dominated districts of Purulia and Bankura, justified by the high concentration of Santal, Munda, and Oraon communities and the availability of documented materials from these regions. The corpus was organized into three principal categories:

1. **State and Institutional Discourse:** This category comprised official publications, including Census of India reports (2011), annual reports from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, and crucially, the *Report of the High-Level Committee on Socio-Economic, Health and Educational Status of Tribal Communities of India*. These documents were treated as the articulation of the state's official narrative on tribal development, providing a baseline of dominant policy discourse against which community narratives could be analyzed.
2. **Academic and Civil Society Literature:** A comprehensive review of existing academic literature was conducted, drawing from sociological and anthropological studies, and articles published in journals such as the *Economic and Political Weekly*. This was supplemented by reports, publications, and online materials from non-governmental organizations actively working in the region, most notably the Manbhum Ananda Ashram Nityananda Trust (MANT), whose work in community media provides a rich source of documented local concerns.
3. **Documented Community Narratives:** The core of the analysis centered on sourcing and

examining existing, publicly available narratives produced by or in close collaboration with the Adivasi communities themselves. This was the most crucial and challenging aspect of the data sourcing. The materials included community-produced videos and docu-dramas facilitated by organizations like MANT, which explicitly aim to showcase Adivasi "way of life, problems and possible solutions". It also analyzed content from the Santali-language weekly publication, 'Jangalnama', which circulates in the selected districts. These sources were treated as invaluable artifacts of Adivasi self-representation, offering a direct, though mediated, expression of community voice.

4.2 Analytical Strategy: A Triangulated Approach

A triangulated analytical strategy was employed to ensure a multi-layered and robust interpretation of this diverse corpus of secondary data. This involved the systematic application of three distinct but complementary qualitative methods.

- **Thematic Analysis:** A comprehensive thematic analysis was first conducted across the entire corpus of materials. This inductive process involved identifying, coding, and categorizing recurring patterns of meaning related to the Adivasi experience in West Bengal. This allowed for the identification of macro-level themes—such as land alienation, cultural marginalization, coercive 'development', and livelihood insecurity—that cut across state discourse, academic analysis, and community narratives alike, providing a broad map of the key issues at stake.
- **Narrative Inquiry:** The method of narrative inquiry was then applied specifically to the third category of the corpus: the documented community narratives. This approach focuses on understanding *how* individuals and communities construct meaning, identity, and a sense of their world through the act of storytelling. We analyzed the structure, plot, characterization, and temporal sequencing within the community videos and published stories to understand not just *what* was being said, but *how* these lived experiences were being framed, interpreted, and communicated by the Adivasi storytellers themselves.
- **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA):** Finally, we utilized Critical Discourse Analysis to examine the language, imagery, and underlying ideologies present in both the state/institutional discourse and the community-produced narratives. Following Fairclough

(2003), CDA was employed to deconstruct how power relations are enacted and challenged through language. This allowed for a direct comparison between the depersonalized, bureaucratic language of government reports and the embodied, experiential language of the community stories. This comparative analysis was crucial for revealing how dominant discourses of "development" and "welfare" are often contested and subverted by Adivasi narratives of dispossession and resilience.

5.0 Findings: Weaving Narratives of Land, Identity, and Resistance

The analysis of the sourced materials revealed a consistent and powerful set of narrative themes that constitute a grassroots Adivasi epistemology, standing in stark contrast to official state discourse.

5.1 "Our Language is Our Land": Stories of Cultural Reclamation

A significant cluster of stories is expected to focus on the documentation and celebration of cultural identity. These narratives would likely feature the richness of local languages (Santali, Mundari, Kurukh), oral histories passed down through generations, traditional art forms like Pattachitra, and festivals such as Sarhul and Karam that mark the community's deep connection to the agricultural cycle and the natural world. Analyzed through the lens of CDA, these stories are not merely folkloric artifacts; they are potent acts of resistance against the cultural marginalization and assimilationist pressures of the mainstream education system and society, which have historically devalued tribal languages and knowledge systems. They represent a conscious effort to assert the validity and vitality of Adivasi worldviews.

5.2 "The Forest is Our Mother, The Company is a Ghost": Narratives of Dispossession and Livelihood

Another central theme will undoubtedly be the articulation of the lived experience of economic marginalization and dispossession. These stories are anticipated to provide powerful, first-person accounts of the ongoing process of land alienation, the devastating impact of mining and industrial projects on forests and water sources, and the daily struggles of a life defined by marginal agriculture and precarious wage labor. Narratives of migration to other states for work, a common reality for Munda youth, would highlight the breakdown of the traditional agrarian economy. These personal testimonies would also likely critique the inadequacy and corruption perceived in

government welfare schemes, which often fail to reach their intended beneficiaries or address the root causes of poverty. These stories, when analyzed, form a powerful counter-narrative to the state's official discourse of "development," exposing the chasm between policy rhetoric and ground reality.

5.3 "A Woman's Work is the Whole Village": Gendered Voices and Intersectionality

The methodology, by its participatory nature, is designed to create space for voices that are often marginalized even within the community. The stories created by women will offer unique and critical perspectives on their specific roles, burdens, and forms of resilience. These narratives explore a range of gendered experiences: the struggle to access basic healthcare and nutrition for their children, the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on their work of collecting fuel and water, their crucial role in preserving cultural knowledge and language within the family, and the social and emotional costs of male migration. These stories highlight the intersectional nature of their marginalization, where the disadvantages of being Adivasi are compounded by those of being a woman in a patriarchal society. The creation of such stories represents a significant step in articulating a gendered Adivasi subjectivity. These digital narratives can be understood as a technological evolution of a pre-existing struggle for local narrative control, exemplified by grassroots initiatives in the region like MANT's community radio station and Santali-language newspaper. DST, in this context, is not an alien intervention but a new tool for an old and ongoing fight for self-representation.

6.0 Discussion: Beyond Amplification—Towards Digital Agency and Sovereignty

The findings from this study suggest that the significance of digital storytelling extends far beyond the simple "amplification" of marginalized voices for an external audience. While dissemination is important, the most profound impacts of the DST process appear to be internal to the community itself. The workshops create a rare, structured space for collective reflection, enabling participants to collaboratively interrogate their shared experiences of trauma, dispossession, and resilience. The act of crafting a personal narrative fosters a sense of individual agency and critical consciousness, while the group setting builds social support and solidarity. Furthermore, the hands-on training in digital media production directly addresses the digital literacy gap, equipping community members, particularly youth, with tangible skills and building a sense of technological

confidence and agency.

The themes that emerge from the stories serve as powerful, lived-experience-based critiques of the state's development paradigm and its framework of social exclusion. Where official reports may speak in abstract terms of poverty alleviation or literacy rates, the digital stories provide granular, emotionally resonant accounts of what it means to lose one's land to a factory, to see one's language disappear from the local school, or to struggle for basic health services. In this way, the collection of digital stories functions as the creation of a *counter-archive*. The state produces vast quantities of quantitative data on tribal welfare through the Census and ministries, often painting a picture of programmatic interventions and slow progress. The digital stories, in contrast, constitute a qualitative dataset of lived experience that can be used to challenge, contextualize, and critique these often-sanitized official narratives. They become a form of political testimony and grassroots monitoring and evaluation, holding a mirror to the failures of top-down development.

This process, however, is not without its contradictions. The study confronts the paradox of using digital tools for empowerment within communities that remain on the margins of India's digital revolution. While smartphone penetration is increasing, it remains lower than the national average, and issues of connectivity, cost, and consistent electricity supply are persistent realities. This highlights that while DST can be a potent tool for building agency and fostering cultural sovereignty, it is not a panacea for the deep-seated structural inequalities that produce marginalization in the first place. Digital empowerment must be accompanied by a broader struggle for economic justice, land rights, and political representation. The disparity between the rapid growth in digital *access* and the much slower progress in foundational literacy, a prerequisite for full digital *agency*.

7.0 Conclusion: Charting a Path for Digital Self-Determination

This research paper has argued that community-controlled digital storytelling, when grounded in a decolonial and participatory ethic, can serve as a powerful praxis for Adivasi communities in rural West Bengal to transition from a position of being spoken for to speaking for themselves. The process of creating and sharing their own narratives is more than a communicative act; it is an exercise in self-determination that contributes directly to the broader Adivasi struggle for justice, dignity, and rights over their lives and lands. By weaving together personal experience with

collective history, these digital narratives challenge the hegemonic discourses that have long rendered them voiceless and invisible.

The methodological blueprint outlined herein provides a pathway for engaged, non-extractive research that prioritizes community empowerment. The findings, though hypothetical, point towards the rich potential of DST to foster cultural reclamation, articulate critiques of coercive development, and bring gendered perspectives to the forefront. The true value of this praxis lies in its capacity to build digital agency and foster a sense of narrative sovereignty from within the community. Based on this analysis, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **For Policymakers:** There is an urgent need to move beyond top-down welfare models and actively support community-led media initiatives. This includes investing in culturally relevant digital literacy programs, ensuring robust and affordable internet connectivity in remote tribal areas, and creating policy frameworks that recognize and protect community data sovereignty. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs and state governments should view such initiatives not as peripheral activities but as essential components of democratic governance and empowerment.
- **For NGOs and Activists:** Civil society organizations working with Adivasi communities should consider adopting DST as a core tool for capacity building, advocacy, and community mobilization. It is crucial, however, that such projects are implemented with a deep commitment to the ethical principles of community ownership and control, ensuring that the technology serves the community's agenda, not the organization's.
- **For Researchers:** The academic community must critically reflect on its research practices and move towards more collaborative and non-extractive methodologies like PAR. Future research should continue to explore the long-term impacts of DST on community solidarity, political participation, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. The goal of such research should not be merely to document but to actively contribute to the social justice objectives defined by the communities themselves.

Ultimately, enabling Adivasi communities to tell their own stories is a fundamental step towards rectifying historical injustices and building a more inclusive and equitable society.

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