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Of Cradles and Chariots, and Epics on Scrolls: Intergenerational Dialogue and Cultural Transmission

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Abstract: Intergenerational dialogue constitutes a critical mechanism for sustaining intangible cultural heritage in South Asia, yet its dynamics and vulnerabilities remain under-studied in sociological literature. Addressing this lacuna, this article presents a qualitative study of fourteen folk artists and their family members – practitioners of hereditary arts such as *Kasuti* hand embroidery, *Pabu-ji ki Phad* bard performers, and *Ajrakh* printing in rural India – to examine how cultural transmission is a dialogic, co-creative endeavour. When a grandfather and grandson sit together to embellish a panel, each interprets and modifies the design in the light of age and experience; far from static, the transmission process is an evolving conversation, keeping culture relevant. Elders impart narrative templates, technical repertoires, and affective models of emotional intelligence, while younger kin recalibrate these legacies in response to digital exposure, schooling, and market volatility. Such reciprocal re-articulation sustains cultural identity and social cohesion and enables communities to mobilise ancestral wisdom against caste discrimination and existential erasure.

Yet this dialogue is increasingly fragile. The loosening of joint-family architectures in India and the aspirational pull of credentialled urban employment compress the time-space coordinates in which apprenticeship can occur. Smartphones broaden aesthetic horizons while normalising consumerist subjectivities that devalue artisanal labour. Gendered labour, often undertaken by grandmothers and mothers, remains undervalued despite its centrality to cultural continuity. As

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youth negotiates emergent identities – class mobility, caste dissent and gender equity – ancestral repertoires risk being reframed as burdensome markers of marginality rather than sources of pride.

The study therefore lays emphasis on cultural identity and resilience as a community-level achievement derived from sustained intergenerational relationality. It positions intergenerational dialogue as indispensable both to preserving intangible cultural resources and cultivating harmonious social cohesion, while fostering a sense of belonging and continuity.

Keywords: Folk Art, Intergenerational Dialogue, Cultural Transmission, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Identity, Resilience

Introduction

Gowri Hiremath bends over her Kasuti embroidery on the beautiful black Ilkal sari, which will be a part of a bridal trousseau. Geometric designs derived from architectural motifs, such as the *gopuram* (a large pyramidal tower over the entrance gate to a temple), the *kalasha* (pot), the *tulsi* plant (sacred basil), cradles, and chariots spring up against the dark fabric. Elephants, cows, parrots, bulls, and peacocks alternate with flowers and creepers in a riot of red, blue, green, yellow, and white threads; the work is so immaculate and precise that the finished design looks perfect on both sides. A variety of stitches come into play named 'ele', 'menti', 'negi', 'gavanti' and 'marige'.

Gowri's twelve-year-old granddaughter Harini watches her intently and works alongside, using a single needle – as tradition demands – and a tracing design on loosely woven net matting placed over the fabric, so that she can do it accurately. The matting is pulled off after completing the task. Among the qualities that the Kasuti artist comes to acquire over the years are patience and concentration. Each thread must be counted: the patterns often involve complex mathematical calculations, ensuring precision and symmetry.

Meanings and understandings are co-produced in an interaction between participants, 'involving the construction or reconstruction of knowledge' (Edwards and Holland 2013, 62). When Gowri and Harini sit together to embellish a Kasuti saree, each interprets and modifies the design in the light of age and experience. Gowri imparts technical knowledge while explaining the significance of the art; all the while, Harini is decoding emotional signals in her grandmother's facial expressions, tone of voice and artistic expression, sometimes posing queries. The shared experience offers not just narrative templates and repertoires, but also affective models of emotional intelligence. Harini will, in time, recalibrate these legacies in response to her own digital exposure, schooling, and the prevailing market volatility.

Their dialogical interaction has set into motion a bidirectional flow of knowledge, experiences, and perspectives. In this study, dialogue is interpreted as a two- or multi-way communication method that is 'grounded in active listening and mutual learning practices between members of different generations, which is meaningful for all parties' (Tanghoj 2023, 13). Not synonymous with a 'discussion, chat or conversation', 'dialogue' can be understood instead, as the forming of 'emotional bonds, such as respect, trust, and concern, besides inculcating an ability to listen' (Burbules 1993, xii). Reciprocity is an inherent part of dialogue.

As a dialogical process, intergenerational dialogue can be described as a two-way communication process in which participants both give and receive (Kvernbekk 2012, 966). It is a structured, intentional conversational exchange between people of different generations aimed at creating shared understanding, meaning, and new ideas. The shared experience of cultural safeguarding that Gowri and Harini carry out together is a form of intentional dialogue that is an integral part of the folklorist's work (Thurston 2024): cultural transmission as co-production.

The theorisation of intergenerational dialogue enriches our existing understanding by providing a robust framework to analyse and leverage the dynamic exchange of knowledge, values, and experiences across age groups. By setting up a shared space where cross-age connections can be made, intergenerational dialogue can broadly ensure the transmission of cultural knowledge in a mutually respectful way. It can provide a structured approach to bridge generational gaps and foster resilience. As Hawes writes in her work on dialogues for peace, 'with dialogue, the outcome, (consensus, conversion, victory) doesn't drive the process. The process is the outcome' (2006, 263).

Intergenerational dialogue therefore constitutes a critical mechanism for sustaining intangible cultural heritage in South Asia, yet its dynamics and vulnerabilities remain under-studied in sociological literature. Addressing this lacuna, this article draws on an ethnographic study of fourteen hereditary practitioners of folk arts and crafts in rural India, along with their family members who contribute to the creative process, totalling 42 participants. It reflects on the nuanced ways in which intergenerational dialogue enables cultural transmission and social cohesion.

Here, 'intergenerational dialogue' refers to interactional exchanges, both oral and embodied, through which cultural knowledge is co-produced under recognisable dialogic conditions. These include reciprocity that could be partial and asymmetry in expertise and authority shaped by hierarchical relations; elders and master practitioners typically hold custodial knowledge and decision-making power, while the younger generation occupies learner roles even as they introduce new preferences and possibilities. Moments of interruption with questions or suggestions become the

norm; at times there is contestation where the older and younger members disagree on creative aspects or on what constitutes 'tradition' and what innovation is permissible. The term 'dialogue' is used here to underline the ways in which they respond to one another, the negotiation and boundary-setting, and how it simultaneously mediates continuity and change across the three hereditary art forms – Kasuti, Pabu-ji ki Phad, and Ajrakh. All three of these arts, like many other folk arts and crafts in the country, are built on the foundation of myth and storytelling, which can be interpreted as processes of 'making meaning and coherence from often chaotic life experience' (Kirmayer, Brass, & Tait 2000, 614).

Running through the accounts is the thread of resilience – a quality that is normatively understood as the capacity to withstand adversity and maintain competent functioning (Kaplan, Turner, Norman, & Stillson 1996, 158). Resilience can also be interpreted as compassionate, flexible, with 'self-righting tendencies' (Vaillant 1993, 248), and 'both the capacity to be bent without breaking and the capacity, once bent, to spring back' (Goldstein 1997, 30).

This inquiry leans into that capacity for renewal and explores the theme of resilience embedded in the lived experiences of a Kasuti hand embroidery practitioner in Karnataka, the *bhopa* and the *bhopi*, who are bards performing the Pabuji ki Phad epic in the desert regions of Shekhavati in Rajasthan, and the Ajrakh block printers of Kutch in Gujarat.

Throughout this article which draws on the narratives of folk artists in India, I have consciously adopted a writing style that departs from the restrained neutrality of conventional academic prose. To honour the lives and knowledge systems of marginalised communities, it feels essential to write in a form that is itself relational, sensory, and alive. Robin Wall Kimmerer advocates a writing practice that listens as much as it analyses (2017). Similarly, Hilary Cremin (2018) and Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983; 2005) have shown that scholarly storytelling can be a moral and aesthetic act, one that respects the dignity and voice of those it represents. This more vivid, embodied mode of writing becomes a small decolonial gesture, resisting the flattening tendencies of technocratic language and instead making space for rhythm, texture, and feeling as legitimate ways of knowing. While doing so, I also take inspiration from Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot's methodology of portraiture which is 'a blend of aesthetic sensibilities and empirical rigor' (2005, 6) to (re)present the research participant through the subjective, empathetic, and critical lens of the researcher (1983, 10).

Cultural Transmission through Intergenerational Dialogue

Article Two of the 2003 UNESCO Convention defines 'intangible cultural heritage' as 'the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.'

In many cultures such as India, storytelling and oral traditions have been the primary means of transmitting knowledge between generations. Cultural transmission and intergenerational dialogue are interdependent. Performative folk arts like storytelling, singing, and dancing can be powerful tools for conveying cultural values and traditions. The lyrics of the epic song, for instance, are based on the heroic exploits of the protagonist and are 'intended to inspire the listener to self-transcendence' (Kak 2002). What the creative process demands is harmonious engagement between the artist and the audience, co-ordination between the artists themselves for a well-synchronised performance, and a receptive audience.

Poetic narrative, in which 'human characters endowed with superhuman qualities and powers, undertake and execute superhuman tasks are to be found in the earliest Indian tradition' (Kak 2002, 1). These art forms also provide a space for intergenerational dialogue and collaboration, fostering a sense of shared identity and purpose. Narrations of specific events from epics are conducted in a setting that encourages interactions with the audience.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, multi-sited research design to reflect on the ways in which intergenerational dialogue enables cultural transmission and social cohesion. My research was conducted across field sites in Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Kerala, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh over a period of two years. Additionally, some of the interviews were conducted in urban settings in the cities of Calcutta, Mumbai, Jaipur, and Bangalore, where the artist or craftsperson was presenting his or her art at a handicraft *mela* (fair) or exhibition.

Sampling was purposive and iterative: initial participants were identified through arts-and-crafts organisations, archival repositories (government and private non-governmental organisations supporting the preservation of traditional folk art), and

media sources on intangible cultural heritage. Snowballing then expanded the pool to include master artisans, apprentices, and performers with varying degrees of market exposure.

Research access in rural settings was facilitated through introductions to the village leader (*mukhiya*) and community representatives who acted as gatekeepers, often accompanying the researcher to the interview site. All participants provided informed consent, and pseudonyms have been used throughout the article.

The data collection process employed methods such as semi-structured interviews, participant observation, storytelling sessions, group discussions, repeat home visits, and photographic documentation. Interviews and focus groups (ranging typically from 90 to 120 minutes) were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In several instances, at participants' requests, interviews were conducted with younger family members present; the elders were informed that youth might listen to their narratives, and some participants invited children or close relatives (e.g., a son-in-law) to sit in. These co-present settings were analytically valuable, as they surfaced intra-familial pedagogy, elicited corrective interjections, and made visible the ethics of consent, attribution, and cultural guardianship in real time. I have intentionally foregrounded gendered and generational perspectives (grandmothers, mothers, young daughters, and apprentices), noting how tacit knowledge, ritual protocol, and craft technique circulate within and across households.

The application of reflexive thematic data analysis linked with the socio-cultural context facilitated a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the artists at the centre of the narratives. Coding proceeded abductively, and themes were iteratively refined by analysing how intergenerational exchanges operated in context – attending to whether reciprocity was present or constrained, how authority and power were organised, and when interactions involved interruption, suggestion, or contestation. Critically, how did these dynamics shape transmission and adaptation? Subsequently, the core theme of resilience was brought into conversation with ideas of cultural transmission, identity, social capital, and social cohesion.

Throughout the process, I made analytic memos that traced how artistic practices were shifting in response to marketisation, climate stress and digital mediation. Interviews, observational notes, and visual material were read alongside one another, and this triangulation was used to strengthen the credibility of the analysis. Ongoing reflections on my positionality as the researcher – a transnational scholar with prior ties to arts networks – helped to keep in view how location, familiarity and attachment shaped the stories that could be heard and told.

The study is primarily guided by two questions: (1) How does intergenerational dialogue enable cultural transmission and social cohesion while scaffolding cultural identity? (2) What forms of resilience are reflected in these practices?

To address these questions, the analysis is organised thematically across the three hereditary traditions. I begin with Kasuti embroidery, where intergenerational dialogue unfolds within the domestic space as a gendered form of apprenticeship and care. This account foregrounds resilience as matrilineal continuity, linking cultural identity to everyday practices of transmission. I then turn to the performative and craft-cluster contexts of Pabu-ji ki Phad and Ajrakh printing in the rural hinterland to examine resilience first as a ritualised experience of spiritual transcendence and unity, and then, as community identity and social cohesion in the aftermath of disaster.

Resilience as a Form of Matrilineal Continuity, Identity and Cultural Transmission

The hereditary art of Kasuti

The term 'Kasuti' can be broken up into 'kai' for hand and 'suti' for cotton – hand embroidery work on cotton (Chabra 2021, 21). Also known as *Kashidakari*, it is a hereditary art dating back to the thirteenth century and is practised chiefly by women in the villages bordering the states of Karnataka and Maharashtra, particularly in Dharwar and Hubli. The oft-told legend goes: the women of Karnataka were well versed in 64 exemplary household arts, and one of them was the art of Kasuti. As a form of matrilineal continuity, it was taught to all the women in the household and passed down from mother to daughter, generation after generation. Until recently, it was customary for the mother to present the bride with a blue-black nine yards Ilkal handloom sari adorned with Kasuti embroidery, called the Chandrakali, which she would wear on her way to her husband's home. It was considered a *shubh shagun* or good omen (Shahane 2016, 40). Woven with a silk warp and a cotton weft with the end panel in pomegranate red, and parrot green, the 'Ilkal' takes its name from the ancient weaving town of Ilkal in the Bagalkot district of Karnataka (India Handloom Brand, 2015).

Gowri, who has lived her entire life in Hubli, got married at the tender age of 16 in what is known as an 'arranged marriage' in India, with the groom selected for her by her parents. Most of the female members of her family conformed to the cultural expectation that as women they must be skilled in the art of Kasuti. Like most brides in traditional families in Karnataka, her wedding trousseau included one created by

her mother. A Kasuti sari is considered an auspicious symbol, representing a love for heritage, continuity, and feminine artistry.

Gowri found that she had a natural dexterity with the needle, and after a day of hard domestic work, would turn to Kasuti embroidery as a source of wellbeing:

> 'I feel connected to my mother while working on it. It is comforting to know that while everything is changing around me, Kasuti is still anchoring me to my roots. It's just destiny that I was born in Karnataka, where a woman is expected to learn Kasuti, maybe not so much now, but back then, it was like that. I am grateful because it set me free to do things other than housework. My art belongs to me, people see me as an artist, that is my identity. Nobody in my husband's family grudges the time I spend on it because it is the tradition. And it also brings in an income... not much, but still. My daughter has taken up an office job, so she is no longer interested in Kasuti. But I am teaching my granddaughter, because I don't want it to be forgotten after my time. I hope she will practise it. I keep telling her that as a Kasuti artist, she will be someone in her own right.'

As UNESCO (2003) notes, 'intangible cultural heritage can only be heritage when it is recognised as such by the communities, groups or individuals that create, maintain and transmit it – without their recognition, nobody else can decide for them that a given expression or practice is their heritage.'

Gowri's act of transmitting knowledge to the youngest generation in her family is reflective of a kind of self-awareness, an understanding of selfhood and ethnic identity that provides a harness for survival within a diverse population (Phinney 2000). The reference to 'feeling close' to her own mother as she works on her craft points to how the art is fortifying cycles of intergenerational connection and matrilineal continuity.

It is curious, though, that Gowri describes Kasuti simultaneously as constraint ('a woman is expected to learn') and resource ('it set me free to do things other than housework'). This ambivalence is analytically important; it suggests that craft can become a form of everyday resilience precisely because it is socially constructed as 'tradition'. It helps Gowri that Kasuti is recognised within her husband's family as respectable feminine practice, for it grants her relative autonomy and a public identity ('people see me as an artist'). Yet Kasuti's location within 'tradition' is double-edged. The sanctioned autonomy offers recognition and respite, while still tethering women's creative labour to the moral economy of domestic propriety.

The dialogue that takes place on a regular basis inside the home between the grandmother and granddaughter could assist Harini in adulthood, in her attempts to create a sense of self, and formulate notions of identity and self-worth. This will set parameters for interactions with others in everyday settings (Erikson 1959). 'Identity constructions provide important symbolic frames for determining appropriate situational behaviour' (Wexler 2011, 259). However, Gowri's fear that Kasuti may be 'forgotten after my time' carries a note of vulnerability. The imperative of 'not letting it be forgotten' also reveals how cultural transmission can carry moral weight: intergenerational dialogue may pass on skill and belonging, but it can also transmit the anxious burden of perpetuity.

Resilience as a form of spiritual transcendence and unity: *the performative art of Pabu-ji ki Phad*

As dusk falls over the tiny village of Pabusar in the semi-arid region of Shekhavati in Rajasthan, the *bhopa* and the *bhopi* (the male and female bards) dig bamboo poles into the earth to secure the sacred, hand-painted scroll – the *phad*, for it weighs almost 20 kilogrammes. Essentially a scroll painting on hand-woven, textured cotton material called *reza*, the *phad* is a visual delight with episodes from the ancient epics captured in brilliant colours in both *katha* and *kavita* formats (story and poetry). Rolled up on a stick, it varies in size from six to nine metres in length and almost two metres in width.

The heroic tradition is an inherent aspect of the folk ethos in India (Sharma et al. 2024). An ancient performative art like Pabu-ji ki Phad in Rajasthan can be traced to the fourteenth century, playing a role in reinforcing social bonds, shared beliefs, and a collective identity. Pabu-ji is the Rajput 'martial-ascetic' and folk deity, who even after his demise in the battlefield is present among the people, guiding them on all worldly affairs. Born of a celestial nymph (named Kesar), Pabu-ji is also believed to be an incarnation of Lakshmana (brother of Lord Rama) from the great Indian epic Ramayana. Primarily worshipped by pastoral communities like the Rebaris for protection against ill-fortune, for safeguarding livestock, or to pray for rain, Pabu-ji is not perceived as a saint, but as an ordinary man who helps people whenever his spirit is invoked (Bhandari 2025).

The *phad* is solemnly opened for the performance only after an invocation of legendary heroes from folk history, followed by a ceremonious lighting of the lamp, the burning of incense, and a lusty blowing of the conch to dispel any negative energy. It is believed that the *phad* hallows the spot it is placed on because it houses Pabu-ji's icon.

For the duration of the performance, the *bhopa* and the *bhopi* become the intermediaries through which the presence of Pabu-ji is invoked (Wickett 2010). The devotees make a symbolic offering of food, known as *akha,* meant for the deity himself, comprising a handful of pearl millet, and a mound of sweet jaggery. This offering is later fed to peacocks or domestic animals, or taken home by the *bhopa.* Food thus sanctified by the gods is then eaten by the faithful (Schechner 1981).

At the auspicious hour known as *chougadia*, the *bhopa*, dressed in a resplendent red robe, begins strumming his two-stringed stick fiddle known as the *rawanhatta*, pitching his voice so that it carries to the last member of the audience, who squats on the ground in an attitude of expectation.

Phad Vancho or Phad Baachna (reading of the *phad*) is a liturgical performative aspect of the art (Singh 2011). Even as the *bhopa* sings, his wife and co-performer, the *bhopi,* trains her terracotta lamp on the vibrant images of the *phad* to highlight the beautifully painted characters who are part of the story. The visuals thus follow the track of the oral narrative or *prasang*, and over the next three hours, the audience is treated to a powerful audio-visual performance. A *phad* recital is a perfectly synchronised performance, concluding normally at the break of dawn (Smith 2005).

I have drawn here on my interviews with Bhopa Gayad Lal Nayak and his wife, Bhopi Nausar from the village of Pabusar in the Shekhavati region of Rajasthan, to illustrate how intangible cultural heritage is not static; it is dynamic, performed, and lived, by both the performer and the artist.

> 'We usually perform at the request of a family, or if the community is in trouble of some sort. Our narrative is seen as part of a votive offering by a family when a *mannat* (desire) has been fulfilled... like when a camel falls ill and is cured. Sometimes they want to ward off an evil spirit. Many times, we perform for childless couples so that they can be blessed with an offspring. I must remain pure of heart when I approach Pabu-ji on their behalf. And I am glad when people from the audience ask me questions about the characters in the epic, for I have a chance to share the moral lessons of the story with the younger generation.' Bhopa Gayad Lal Nayak

Tejas Joshi, an eminent hereditary scroll painter, whose father and forefathers have been practising this art, explains:

> 'The power of the performance is secondary to the power of Pabu-ji, who is seen as a deity. It is usually commissioned during the festival of Teej or Gangaur. Or sometimes, a village has installed a new shrine, or

> somebody has purchased agricultural land, and they want it to be graced by Pabu-ji's presence, or it could be part of an all-night session of devotional songs. A *phad* painting can take anywhere from four weeks to three months to create, you must be completely devoted to it. It is a privilege to be a *phad* painter. You have to be born as one, you cannot just take it up as a casual profession'.

As dawn breaks, and the long hours of singing end, there is a palpable sense of becoming one as a community. They have shared in Pabu-ji's adventures, the battles, the triumph of good over evil; the lessons of sacrifice and courage have been told and retold; altogether there is a sense of collective cleansing of the soul and spirit. Hope is in the air; they are under the protection of a higher power.

However, it is important to note that even as this hereditary folk art fosters community cohesion through the retelling of legends to a captive audience, it remains embedded within casteist frameworks. Most of Pabu-ji's worshippers are the seminomadic, pastoral Rebari community who are deemed lower in the caste hierarchy. They are often given names other than their honorific title of 'Dewasi' or 'the one in whom dwells God' (Srivastava 1994, 591). A derogatory title like '*bhoot*' or 'ghost' may be used to refer to the Rebaris because of their nomadic lifestyle. 'Raika' is how the Rebari community would like to be addressed, as it means that they are 'the progeny of the celestial nymph 'Rai' (ibid. 1994, 591). Similarly, the singers of the Pabuji epic belong to the Nayak caste but could often be dismissed as '*thori*', which loosely translates into the hierarchically lower 'scheduled caste' (ibid. 591). It is also insisted that the *phads* are created only by the painters from the Joshi caste, mostly settled in southeast Rajasthan (Smith 2005, 66).

Nevertheless, the shared experience in a non-hierarchical setting, however temporary, generates the social capital required to work as the social glue bridging social differences. It binds them into one integrated whole. In those hours of spiritual transcendence during the performance, a cohesive multi-caste, multi-generational community rises that feels united.

What is problematic, however, is that the performance allocates authority and visibility unevenly along gendered lines, thereby constraining the *bhopi*'s bodily autonomy and public presence. The *bhopa* and *bhopi* perform distinct and gender-specific roles: they never sing together; the wife who is veiled completely, including her face, must stay as still as possible while she sings, allowing her husband, the *bhopa,* to dominate the visual performance (Wickett 2010). In her extensive research on the performing art of Pabu-ji ki Phad, Elizabeth Wickett points to how the *bhopa* communities insist on marrying within the community, and how young girls, or would-be *bhopis*, are pledged in marriage to young men aspiring to become *bhopa*s at

a very early age. Once they marry, they embark on lifelong partnerships as performing duos (ibid. 2010, 3). This is a cultural practice that conforms to societal expectations rooted in the patriarchal setting that they hail from.

What is more, while men are formally indoctrinated in epic recitation as boys, the females in the community are only allowed to sing after beginning to live with their husbands (to whom they are married as children) (ibid. 2010, 2). It is a compelling performance, though 'how a woman learns all the lines of the Pabu-ji epic... remains a mystery!' (Bharucha 2003, 113).

Significantly, while the actors stay nested in their roles for the duration of the performance, they transcend their caste identities in the temporal period within which they construct, produce, and present the audio-visual art. The *bhopa* is transformed into the invoker of the divine, the audience are not just the Rebari cattle herders, but worshippers, and the *phad* painter is the architect of a mobile temple.

Resilience here takes the form of transcendence, though transient and conditional. During the performance, what the audience experiences is the temporary suspension of caste within the orb of caste-structured roles and gendered restrictions. Cohesion is an achieved, time-bound effect within a governed ritual frame, but it is not a permanent social transformation. The performance generates a temporary unity that feels like collective cleansing and protection, yet the social hierarchies of everyday life remain largely unchanged. It offers an experience of moral and spiritual integration robust enough to sustain people through precarious life conditions, yet it does so through a tightly governed ritual frame that cannot be assumed to translate into lasting egalitarian change.

Even so, this hereditary art provides continuity and reassurance in a precarious ecosystem. The *bhopa* and the *bhopi* are symbolic bearers of continuity: resilience and cultural identity emerge through affective communal scaffolding. The dialogic relation between the performers and the audience is mobilised as an authorised pedagogic mechanism which creates a shared interpretive grammar. There are deep moral lessons being imparted in each ballad about the actions of human beings and the consequences thereof. The characters, even heroic ones like Pabu-ji, are flawed, and there is a moral ambiguity about their actions which is demonstrated in the way they succumb to situations and make decisions (Kak 2002). It creates a unique and inclusive space for cultural transmission.

The community gathered around the live performers – some of them sitting on the bare earth, some squatting on sack cloth – and the passionate outpouring of verse by the light of a lantern... all of it becomes a vital part of the social fabric, actively sustaining community life and social cohesion, nurturing a sense of cultural identity.

Resilience as a mode of community identity and social cohesion: *the ancient art of Ajrakh printing*

'No words can describe the horror of an earthquake, it stays with you all through your life,' says Alam Mohammad Khatri sombrely. Khatri lives in the village of Dhamadka, in Kutch, Gujarat, and was only eight years old, when the Anjar earthquake of 1956 devastated over 3,000 villages and rendered thousands homeless.

This section illustrates how arts-based, intergenerational dialogue can become a tool to generate community resilience post-disaster. The Kutch area is prone to earthquakes. Its vulnerability lies in its geology: tectonic structures beneath Kutch and Gujarat are characterised by a complex rift basin system shaped by significant tectonic activity along the western margin of the Indian plate. It is one of the most active and vulnerable intra-cratonic zones in the world categorised as seismic zone V with the potential to produce earthquakes of intensity IX or higher (Ghavri et al. 2022). However, many residents in the area, like Khatri's family, have multi-generational family ties to the region and a deep emotional attachment to their homes and communities, which prevents them from leaving the area. Kutch's seismic vulnerability is well documented; yet households remain, because of their attachments to place and local kinship histories. Resilience in this context must not be interpreted as turning away from risk, but as staying and repairing. It is as if the community expects to rebuild and accepts that eventuality. It has been culturally normalised.

The art of Ajrakh has a history that can be traced to 2500bc–1500bc. It is an ancient technique of hand-carving wooden blocks to produce elaborate patterns and then transferring them onto the cloth through the process of stamping (Iftikhar and Tariq 2024, 90). Ajrakh textiles exhibit vibrant hues and intricate geometric motifs, frequently sourced from organic dyes. The printing involves 16 complex stages of production, such as *saaj*, where the cloth is washed to remove impurities and softened with agents such as camel dung, castor oil, or myrobalan, and *kasano*, where the fabric is treated with myrobalan to improve dye uptake. The motif is then block-printed with a resist paste called *khariyanu*, then immersed in multiple dye baths, then thoroughly washed and sun-dried. Repeating this dye-wash-dry cycle builds stratified colour and pattern, yielding the characteristic depth of Ajrakh (Map Academy 2022). Acknowledged as both an art and a craft with deep cultural significance, it is predominantly practised in the regions of Sindh, Gujarat, and Rajasthan by the Muslim Khatri community.

Khatri recalls:

> 'Back in 1956, our village was among the worst affected. It was terrible, so many died. The houses, the public utilities, the village school,

> and our workshop where my father did his Ajrakh printing – the printing blocks, the fabrics – they were all destroyed. But we rebuilt the village, and our house, as well as our workshop. After that happened, I never went back to school; instead, I helped him start all over again. Over a hundred Ajrakh printing families rebuilt their workshops – it was the only skill they had, they had been doing it for generations. *Mera bachpan aise hi guzar gaya* (I lost my childhood to that earthquake), but I did alright. We have faced other earthquakes after that, like the 2001 Bhuj earthquake, but our community has always got back on its feet, and we had Ajrakh to sustain us.'

In an expression of collective resilience, after the 2001 Bhuj earthquake and water-table disruption in Dhamadka, the large community of Ajrakh printers rapidly reorganised themselves to resettle in the village of Ajrakhpur, named after their beloved art. Collaborative structures that spring up in response to disaster situations possess transformative potential, facilitating recovery and enhancing adaptive capacity (Williams and Buergelt 2021).

The move to Ajrakhpur signalled to buyers that this dedicated craft cluster now had a collective identity. Determined to keep their heritage alive and faced with chronic water stress, the community partnered with local organisations to pilot effluent treatment and water recycling, to ensure that natural-dye processes could continue uninterrupted.

Another artist, Sufiyan Ismail Khatri, whose sons along with other younger members of the community are focused on sustaining Ajrakh production by incorporating digitisation into the marketing mix, observes:

> 'Standing together as one united community in the face of precarity helped us. My sons have suggested new ways to pool orders, found channels for informal credit, and do online marketing. These young people track market response; explain to us which prints are popular with the buyers; we elders teach them about how feasible it is to do certain designs. Not all new ideas are acceptable, but we talk things out, and we work together. We also conduct workshops to share our knowledge of Ajrakh with newer artists.'

There is a conscious effort to ensure that knowledge is passed down from generation to generation. From the time they were young school-going children, Alam Mohammad Khatri's eight sons and three daughters spent every spare moment in mastering the art of Ajrakh printing. Intergenerational dialogue between generations involves a great deal of listening as well as providing explanations. The teacher artist

moves away from 'folkways of teaching', that is 'ready-made recipes for action and interpretation that do not require testing or analysis while promising familiar, safe results' (Buchmann 1987, 161) while passing on knowledge to his young protégés.

Like his father and grandfather, Khatri continues to use natural vegetable dyes, rather than cheap, artificial colours for fabric dyeing, despite it being more laborious and cost intensive.

> 'We stick to tradition. We are probably the only family to have four National Award-winning members. My father won it in 1981, I won it in 1998, my eldest son in 2002, and then my younger son Sayyed, who struggles with a mental disability, won it in 2005. I remember how one day we made him participate in our work. Now, we use a number of unusual elements in the preparation of the raw materials, like tamarind seed, alum, jaggery, myrobalam, wood powder, and camel dung. Sayyed plunged both his hands into the pastes and swirled it around, dipped the blocks in it and stamped them on the fabric to create unusual designs. It was as if Ajrakh was drawing out his innate creativity. He now spends long hours with us in the workshop, absorbing knowledge and applying it in his designs. This is why Ajrakh has a special place in our hearts, because it heals people.' Alam Mohammed Khatri

Khatri's narrative suggests how in the face of loss, the arts become a way to mobilise traditions that hold deep meaning and transmit them to the next generation. Leading lives that have been described as the 'precarious, fractured and marginalised existence' of artisanal communities (Scrase 2003, 449), it is the emotional scaffolding provided by their hereditary art that sparks resilience and reassurance.

Challenges to sustaining intergenerational dialogue

Nevertheless, the diminishing appeal of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) within India is marked, as state priorities emphasise modern developmental goals, posing a continuing challenge to the preservation of ICH. The findings of this study indicate that some hereditary arts like Ajrakh have been able to survive despite the exponential changes that have swept across societies in India. Yet, many arts and crafts that come under the aegis of ICH face erasure.

The causal factors are many, including the loosening of joint-family architectures, increased geographical dispersion, regional mobility, and the aspirational pull of credentialled urban employment. Gendered labour, often undertaken by grandmothers and mothers, remains undervalued despite its centrality to cultural continuity. Young people negotiate emergent identities with more digitisation in the coun-

try, more mobile connectivity, and exposure to social media. There is a palpable reluctance to be defined by class or caste like their fathers and forefathers were. With class mobility, caste dissent, and gender equity, ancestral repertoires risk being reframed as burdensome markers of marginality rather than sources of pride.

Additionally, the increased exposure to alternate forms of modern, easy to access digital entertainment has led to a steady decline in the overall appeal of folk and tribal art traditions (Hauser 2002). India is now recognised as the world's largest digital marketplace by users, with more than 850 million internet subscribers and 1.2 billion mobile connections (Nandha 2025). Unfortunately, smartphones broaden aesthetic horizons while normalising consumerist subjectivities that devalue artisanal labour.

Other events like the Covid-19 pandemic have affected the sustaining of these intangible cultural legacies in crippling ways, rendering folk artists helpless in terms of earning a livelihood, resulting in a diminishing of their social standing. Once much-in-demand performers along the pastoral routes of Rajasthan, the *bhopa*s today are rendered more sedentary as their patronage base erodes. Encroachment on grazing commons, privatisation of scarce water, recurrent drought, and the compounded effects of climate change and urbanisation have destabilised nomadic livelihoods and, by extension, the *bhopa*s' performance economy (Wickett 2010). In response to this ecological and socio-economic dislocation, many *bhopa*s are relocating to towns and reorienting their practice toward tourist venues, signalling a shift from community-embedded ritual performance to market-mediated cultural display. In a battle for survival, many scroll painters have begun incorporating scenes from contemporary life into the *phad*, including imaginative depictions of Covid-19 (Sabnani 2022).

Inevitably, intergenerational dialogue contextualised within the transmission of intangible cultural heritage is becoming increasingly fragile in India. It becomes a pressing need, therefore, to promote increased intergenerational dialogue amongst and within artist communities, even if that entails reworking tradition in keeping with the times.

> Even though oral tradition works to maintain an unbroken chain of teachings, collective history is retold in new ways in each generation, using contemporary images and vocabulary. Living traditions are always works in progress. (Kirmayer, Brass, & Tait 2009, 440)

Conclusion

Living cultural traditions provide the loom upon which a nation's societal fabric is spun.

Ancient patterns of sound and form surge to the surface and find conscious expression, century after century. This creation and display of traditional art often coincide with significant life course events – births, marriages, harvest festivals, or rites of passage. These occasions lend gravity and purpose to the art, reinforcing its role in structuring social life and marking transitions.

This paper has argued for increased attention to be paid to the nurturing of intergenerational dialogue, such that it can play its role effectively in protecting intangible cultural heritage for the benefit of future generations. Intangible cultural heritage, encompassing ancient practices, traditions, and skills, will eventually fade into oblivion without the support of intergenerational transmission of knowledge. This transmission process needs to be an evolving conversation to keep culture relevant.

My study has focused on three examples of hereditary folk arts in India to demonstrate the enduring importance of intergenerational dialogue and its contribution to a more harmonious existence. It has examined three strands of resilience practised through arts-based, dialogic practices: resilience as a form of matrilineal continuity, identity, and cultural transmission; resilience as a form of spiritual transcendence and unity; and resilience as a mode of community identity and social cohesion in the aftermath of disaster.

In the case of Kasuti embroidery, apprenticeship within families converts embodied memory into durable practice. Gowri Hiremath's pedagogy becomes an intervention against cultural erasure, tying technique to legacy and history in ways that instil place-based identity in the younger generation. Kasuti is commonly invoked through a vernacular lineage of feminine accomplishment; the legend of the '64 household arts' makes the art at once an ordinary domestic practice and a distinctive marker of cultural value. Women's labour is envisioned as heritage, thereby lending the intergenerational transmission of knowledge a deeper meaning. The Chandrakali sari here is embodied as a ritual object that converts maternal labour into a portable archive of family memory. When the mother presents the embroidered sari to the bride, it is a material condensation of continuity, moving with the bride into her marital home while carrying the natal lineage's affective presence. Thus, Kasuti is not merely passed down; it is performed as matrilineal continuity through rites of passage, where 'good omen' discourse (*shubh shagun*) naturalises the expectation that women will uphold tradition.

The performative art of Pabu-ji ki Phad transforms complex narratives into engaging, uplifting theatrical compositions based on the ancient epics, sustaining living heritage while transmitting moral values. Technique and meaning, ritual and storytelling coalesce, gathering dispersed households into a shared social space to reaffirm values, and enact resilience through a ritualised experience of spiritual transcendence and social unity. In the balance, the art of Pabu-ji ki Phad continues to reinforce social bonds and shared beliefs and to instil a sense of collective belonging. It brings about community cohesion through the experience of shared ritualistic performances that transcend social boundaries.

In the practice of Ajrakh, intergenerational dialogue is not only about familial knowledge transmission, but a pedagogic system that sustains the craft's grammar while enabling innovation. Tradition is kept alive without fixing it too rigidly in place. Intergenerational dialogue functions as the craft's adaptive infrastructure, mediating stability and change across technique, design, ecology, and markets. There is ongoing elder-youth negotiation over motifs, materials, and workflow, that results in community-approved standards being set for Ajrakh production. Tradition is not done away with; instead, it is accommodated within the canvas of innovation. Accepting ideas from the younger generation bolsters the chances of the art's survival. Intergenerational dialogue can thus legitimise adaptation.

The elders in the community transmit tacit know-how, with repeated guidance and narrated memory of past experiments on the feel of the fabric, the texture of the blend of pastes, and a sense of timing to judge the dye-wash-dry cycles. The younger printers respond dialogically, scaling repeat sizes for apparel, calibrating indigo/madder contrasts for contemporary palettes, adopting wastewater controls, and storytelling the lineage on digital platforms. The result is negotiated constancy in the face of calamity, where resilience is reflected in community cohesion. A shared repertoire of old and new printing blocks and aesthetic rules are periodically re-authored as generations debate authenticity, risk, and opportunity.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that most craftsmen and folk artists in India continue to live at the intersection of devotion, artistry, and precarity. Yet they practise their hereditary arts and crafts, impelled by the need to preserve cultural identity while eking out a livelihood. Within this variegated, creative universe marked by uncertainty, the role of intergenerational dialogue becomes critical to stewarding its adaptive continuity.

This study finds that far from being static, such reciprocal re-articulation sustains cultural identity and social cohesion; it enables communities to mobilise ancestral wisdom against caste discrimination and existential erasure. Cultural resilience emerges as a key community-level achievement derived from sustained intergenera-

tional relationality, positioning intergenerational dialogue as indispensable, both to preserving cultural resources and cultivating harmonious social cohesion, while fostering a sense of belonging and continuity.

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