

## IMPACT OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN PRESERVING INDIAN FOLK AND TRIBAL TRADITIONS BY INDIAN PHOTOGRAPHER

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### Abstract

Our nation is filled with variety of culture and traditions. There are above 570 distinctive tribal groups residing all over India. Tribal and folk traditions reveal and outline beliefs, essence, and desires of people that contribute them a unique national identity. The significance of protecting our cultural heritage and value is that it keeps us integrated as citizens of one nation. Photography as a medium of art, which not only captures the real life, moment, emotions and expressions but also, helps in recording and communicating it to the world. This paper is an initiative to review the role and impact of photography in preserving Folk and tribal culture, tradition and art in India.

**Key words:** Photography, Folk Photography, Tribal Photography and Preserving Folk and Tribal culture.

### INTRODUCTION: INDIAN TRIBAL AND FOLK CULTURE

Indian society is a perfect paradigm of harmony in diversity of culture. The tribal of India tribal are conventionally known as Adivasi (aboriginal), Vana vasi (forest dweller), and Girijan (hill tribe) and are acknowledged as indigenous resident of the country. The culture and traditions of has grown from side to side of Indian culture and civilization. Tribal dialect, ritual practices, belief system, custom and tradition are all important aspect of tribal culture, and placed in unique position in the Indian society and culture. According to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs survey conducted in 2013, the tribal population represents only 8% of the nation's total population. Rapid industrialization, urbanization, western education and mega developmental projects and displacement are slowly taking us away from these cultures.

Photography as an important medium not only let us gazes into to the past or allows reliving moments but also helps in documenting life. It substantially conserves memories, aids in identify us, and acts as a fundamental basis of evidence. A style of photographs known as document photography have always tried to document and present straightforward records of events, people and

places, often recording important historical or political moments, thereby preserving the cultural legacy of Indian tribes. Photographing the indigenous tribes and documenting their lives are not only helping in protection but also in propagation of the dying traditions.

### **IMPORTANCE: PHOTOGRAPHY DOCUMENTING AND COMMUNICATING**

Photography has helped in documenting and preserving our culture and heritage in many multiple ways. Other art media like painting, illuminated manuscripts, sculptures, realistic portraits, etc. were used to document and narrate stories of the past before invention of photography. Prehistoric rock art, Ajanta murals of Gupta period, Mughal miniatures and realistic western art influenced paintings are clear evidence of our desire for documentation of present and transmitting to next generations. In the 18th century, while researching, scholars relied heavily on illustrations of ancient ruins. Over the next 100 years, drawings, wood-cuts, bas reliefs and engravings were used to illustrate the clearing of sites, removal of artifacts and so on. Finally, photography was resorted to, as it had 'fidelity' of description—it helped establish accuracy and authenticity.

In 1902, the then Viceroy of India the Director General appointed Lord Curzon Marshall to lead the excavation activities in India. Born in 1876, at Chester, UK, it was under Marshall's tenure that the Survey was first professionalized and photographic archives began. He ensured that each monument and relic was photographed before it was 'touched'. Sometimes, Marshall called for simple, documentary photos of monuments where no work was going on. These images were then tagged, categorized and archived.

The word photograph was coined in 1839 by Sir John Herschel and is based on the Greek word 'phos', meaning 'light', and 'graphê', meaning 'drawing' – so 'drawing with light. Unlike painting or other visual art medium photography gives us genuine representation and impression of the civilization and culture. It aids in effective narration and understanding of history or events. Pictures helps us in imagining the actual environmental settings and observe every minute details. Photo documentation and sharing on social networking or online sites has enabled quick mass communication on global platform.



Fig 1: The Heritage Museum in Hoi (Left) and Tribal museum Bhopal (Right)

The efforts of photography in comprehensive efforts for the preservation of cultural heritage including cultural sites, old buildings, monuments, shrines, and landmarks that have cultural significance and historical value are worth appreciating. The present study is envisioned to outline the contribution of photography in documenting and preserving culture and heritage of tribal and folk traditions in India. The photographic records of indigenous tribes of India before they “perish and are forgotten forever” have served as means in conserving and revival of these traditions globally.

### **ROLE OF PHOTOGRAPHY DOCUMENTING AND PRESERVING INDIAN TRIBAL AND FOLK CULTURE**

The tribal way of life and environment is completely different from the traditional way of life. In present time true cultural identity of tribal has faded in the urban, semi-urban and industrial environment. Photographs connected to traditional possessions are usually meant for recording historical materials, and have the role of preserving data for the future. Therefore, photographic documentation is a powerful tool to preserve and document our rich cultural heritage. This paper presents exertions of Indian photographers in preserving tribal traditions from 19<sup>th</sup> century till present.

India’s one of most significant photographer Sunil Janah captured tribal and cultures before and after independence. Janah’s Vintage Photographs 1940-1960 on themes tribals and industrialization bring to mind reminiscence of India which was very different and documents the changes which prevailed in that era.

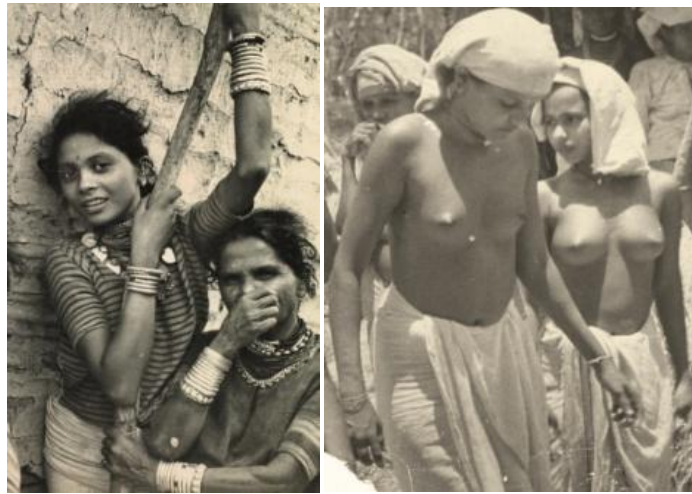


Fig. 2: Gujarati fisher folk (Left) and Malabar peasant (Right).Credit: Sunil Janah. From Swaraj Art Archive



Fig. 3: Santal boys, Bihar (Left), Mikir tribal girl, Assam (2<sup>nd</sup>) and Manipuri dancer Ritha Devi (3<sup>rd</sup>) Credit: Sunil Janah. From the Swaraj Art Archive

Jyoti Bhatt and Raghav Kaneria travelled immensely all over Gujarat and few parts Rajasthan to document the tribal tradition and customs for presenting exhibition and seminar on audio-visual folk arts of Gujrat organized in Mumbai in 1967. Their photographs reflected their graphic and sculptural sensibility in photographic documentation of folk & tribal.

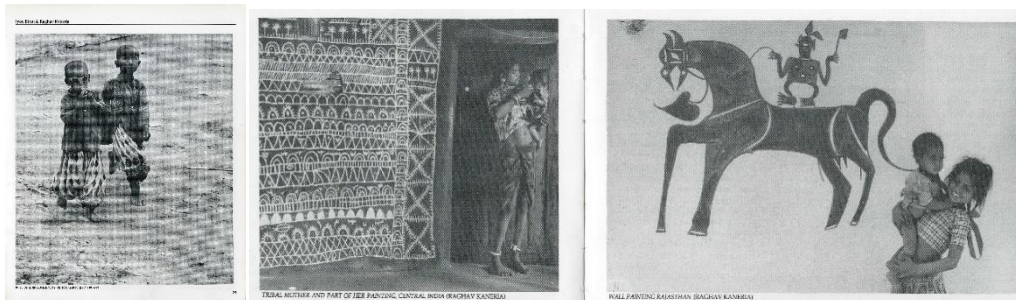


Fig. 4: Photographic documentation of folk & tribal art of Gujarat



A self-taught photographer Raghubir Singh was born in Jaipur and lived in Paris, London and New York. Singh was a pioneer of color street photography who captured and published frequently from the late 1960s until his sudden death at age fifty-six. Singh's early works focused on the geographic and social anatomy of cities and regions of India. The book *River of Colour* was published during retrospective exhibition organized by the Art Institute of Chicago in 1998. His last notes work 'A Way into India' printed later, showcased use of the Ambassador car as camera obscura; he used its doors and windshield to frame and divide his photographs. The Ganges, Calcutta, Benares, Rajasthan, Grand Trunk Road, and the Hindustan Ambassador car are among few 14 well-known books published by him. At present, his photographs has been included in the eternal collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography.



Fig. 5: The Ambassador car (Left) and the Ganges (Right)



Fig. 6: A Bus Stop, Barmer, Rajasthan 1974 (Left) and Rains, Monghyr, Bihar 1967 (Right)

Aman Chotani a contemporary Indian photographer is on a mission of capturing and making archive tribes of India of for coming generations and researchers to hold the antiquity of civilizations and traditions before time and technology sweep them over.

Aman said in his recent interview “I have grown up looking at photos of God. But for me, our ancestors are our creators. These tribes... the first inhabitants of India.”



Fig 7: The Drokpas of Ladakh (Left) and *The Raikas of Rajasthan wearing turban* by Aman Chotani

*“The cultures are getting lost, and 50 years from now, you may only hear of them at a museum,”* says Chotani. One of his projects the Last Avatar in 2018, archiving the lives of Adivasis will be converted into a photo book capturing 25 tribes of India. Till now, he has seized the Aryans or Drokpas of Ladakh, the Konyaks of Nagaland, the Ahirs of Gujarat, the Apatani tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, and many more.



Fig. 8: The Aghoris (Left) and *The Konyaks of Nagaland* by Aman Chotani



Fig. 9: *The Ahir tribe of Kutch in Gujarat* and *The Raika tribe of Rajasthan* by Aman Chotani



**Fig. 10:** The Konyaks of Nagaland and the Apatanis of Arunachal Pradesh with nose plugs and tattoos on their face by Aman Chotani

Trupal Pandya is a photographer who blurs the lines between portraiture, fine arts, and documentary photography. He has participated in the prestigious Eddie Adams Workshop, and interned with Magnum photographer Steve McCurry, well-known for his iconic photograph 'Afghan Girl'. He is one of the few Indian photographers who have worked with National Geographic, CNN, Huffington Post, and with the United Nations on a special assignment to photograph refugee camps in Iraq.



**Fig 11:** The Brokpas wearing a flower from the Chinese Lantern plant (Left) and Brokpas Woman by Trupal Pandya

Pandya travels to various continents and spends close, intimate periods of time with tribals and locals, respectfully ingraining himself in their lives and documenting their attire, habits, and culture. His portfolio includes pictures of the Huaorani Community of the Amazon Rainforest, Nagaland's last surviving Headhunters, the Aghoris, and the tribes of Omo Valley in Ethiopia. His standout



work from the mountains of India has undoubtedly been his documentation of the Brokpas — the secret, ancient tribe of the Himalayas. Pandya describes a selection of his photos in detail.



**Fig 12:** The Brokpas, men wearing fake, synthetic flowers, symbolic of changing times by Trupal Pandya  
<http://www.trupalpandya.com/>

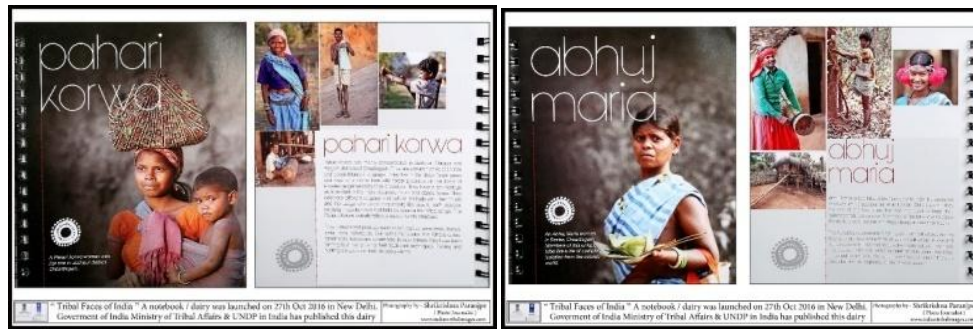
Delhi-based photographer Udit Kulshrestha loves to capture the many colours of life. He documented the Wancho tribe; a fierce Mongolian headhunting warrior tribe settled on the Arunachal-Myanmar borders.



**Fig 13** The Wancho tribe (Left) and Holi (Right) by

Shrikrishna Paranjpe, has closely seen the lives of many communities in the remote parts of the country and has photographed more than 175 tribes in last decade. On his visit to tribal museum Pune for an assignment, the jewelry clothing and other utilitarian products fascinated him. He was stunned to see that there was no photograph of tribal people displayed in the museum so he decided to capture the life and culture of these people. Paranjpe has traveled extensively in the tribal areas of Maharashtra, Gujrat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Nagaland, Chattisgarh, Arunachal Pradesh, Odisha etc.





**Fig 13:** Tribal Faces Diary by Shrikrishna Paranjpe

He has captured more than 125 tribes in over 5 lakh images. Over the years, he has successfully organized more than 15 exhibitions of tribal photography at Pune, Delhi, Mumbai, Nashik, Hyderabad etc. Following his successful at Pune, Chhattisgarh Tribal Research Institute appointed him to do a photo documentation of 5 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups namely Baiga, Abhuj Maria, Pahadi Korba, Kamar & Birhor. Currently he is working on more than 12 books based on the art, culture & livelihood of the Indian tribal community. He has worked for UNDP INDIA. This Tribal Faces Dairy has been published by UNDP & Ministry of Tribal Affairs. Many of his Photos of Maharashtra Tribes are displayed in Pune Tribal Musueum.

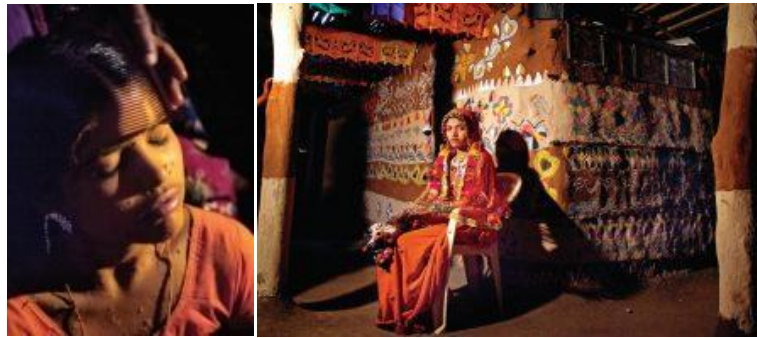
An eminent photo artist from city of joy Kolkata, India Tania Chatterjee has captured a photo story is a sincere effort to give a glimpse of Bastar and its wonderful people. She believe that if someone wants to get the true feel of “primitive society”, he/she have to enter deep inside the forest land and visit the tribal villages to witness their daily life and culture.



**Fig 14:** Tribal Nucleus of India by Tania Chatterjee

**Ghanshyam Kahar** shot a tribal community wedding in Bhakatgarh, Madhya Pradesh. Having documented several weddings before this, ranging from the big-budget weddings to even documenting child marriage, he was passionate to shoot a tribal wedding. This wedding was shot in 2011, when cellphone photography had taken a decent grounding in the country, thus familiarizing

people with the idea of being photographed. Therefore, his camera intimidated no one. Although in the beginning, the villagers were a little shaken by his presence, they quickly got over their inhibitions, once they understood why he was there.



**Fig. 15:** A tribal community wedding in Bhakatgarh, Madhya Pradesh by Ghanshyam Kahar

Pian Kandarp Solanki a Gujarat based photographer captured the festival of Holi celebrated by the tribes in the Dang District of Gujarat in which Bhil, Varli, Kunbi or Kotwaliya tribe communities takes part to celebrate Holi festival. This traditional Holi festival celebrated for seven days, in which Holi is lit every day in any one village and nearby villagers, also participates in Holi. According to the tribe's rituals, those who take a vow is, Till then do not stay in the house and do not have any food and do not even have to meet the family members until the festival of Holi is over.



**Fig 16:** The Dang District of Gujarat Holi celebrations by Pian Kandarp Solanki

## CONCLUSION

According to intellectual psychology research that images can strengthen communications in several different way for instance they can capture attention, evoke emotions, and easily convey large amounts of information in a relatively short amount of time. Photography being an ultimate tool for capturing our surroundings with a realistic approach has helped a lot in documenting and preserving our traditions, values and customs. Due to the very nature of capturing evidence, it has impacted the way we remember things from our past. A photograph not only record but also convey so much more information than one cannot with words. In fact, it can take a thousand words just to describe what is in one picture. So, we can conclude that photography is the supreme impactful and proficient way utilized by contemporary photographers & researchers for saving our folk and tribal values, culture, customs and art.

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