

## **A Problem and A Solution: A Suggestion Towards Enabling Comprehensive Studies of the Digital Folk Culture(s) of India**

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### **Abstract:**

The massive growth of the User Generated Content (UGC) on the internet in India in the past decade has led to the flourishing of the digital folk cultures on the internet in India. The diversity of these digital folk cultures and their associated content has managed to capture the diversity of India. These digital folk cultures have become very influential over time in shaping the emergent public consciousness in the country, therefore, there is a need to document and study them. This, however, is a very difficult thing to do due to the personalisation, and the resultant fragmentation of the web. There is no objective field of study as there are as many (experiences of the) internet(s) as there are people engaging with it. This makes it very difficult (if not impossible) for a researcher to encounter, find, and engage with content outside of his/her own filter bubble. Therefore, undertaking meaningful macrocosmic studies of the Indian digital folk culture(s), as well as microcosmic studies of those digital folk cultures which exist far away from the filter-bubbles of the conventional (privileged) academic scholars in India becomes very difficult. This paper addresses this problem by proposing the formation of a comprehensive digital resource of all the important digital folk cultural texts in India (including memes, viral videos, viral trends, etc.) which would act not just as a digital database of these texts but would also provide meaningful contextual information that allow the users of the website (both, academic and the general public) to make sense of them.

*Keywords:* Digital Folk Culture, Digital Culture India, User Generated Content India, Internet in India, Indian Internet Archive

## The Problem

The past decade has witnessed a massive spread of the internet in India which has been accompanied by a parallel rise in User Generated Content (UGC). This has led to the formation of (what can be considered as) the folk culture(s) of the digital times – the culture(s) formed through the practices popularized by ordinary people. The diverse nature of our country has given rise to diverse digital folk cultures which have become increasingly influential over time in shaping the emergent public consciousness in the country. Therefore, there is a need for documenting and studying them.

When we look at the present situation on the internet in India, two aspects stand out. The first is that the internet, and especially the digital folk cultures enabled by the User Generated Content platforms and the practices around it has enabled the internet folk cultures in India to capture a slice of the rich diversity of the peoples and their ethos of this country which the traditional popular media has failed to do. This is one of the biggest reasons for its popularity and the influence it wields on creating and shaping the contemporary public culture(s) in the country. Digital folk is especially influential amongst the youth of the country which makes it doubly important because it is the preoccupations of the youth today which go on to become the dominant cultural practices of tomorrow. This makes the documentation and comprehensive studies of these folk cultures very important, especially from the point of view of understanding and writing contemporary history.

The second aspect of the internet in India which stands out today is the effects of the personalization of the web which has led to its fragmentation and which is central to our experience of the web today. This is an integral part of Web 2.0 which happened along with the growth of the internet in India. This personalization of the web and its accompanying echo-chamber has led to the creation filter bubbles which has led to a situation where every individual user of the internet experiences only a partial and customized version of it. There are as many (experiences of the) internet(s) as there are people engaging with it. Therefore, from a researchers' point of view, there is no objective field of study. The various digital folk cultures exist in their respective echo-chambers and are only accessible to the people within those networks. It is very difficult, if not impossible, for people outside these networks/echo-chambers to encounter and discover these folk cultures and their texts.

It is the combination of these two aspects – of the existence of diverse digital folk cultures in India along with the technological and social factors which has led to these various cultures to exist within their bubbles with limited, if any, interaction with each other, that has given these digital folk cultures in India the essential character of existing together but separately. Such a situation makes it very difficult to conduct studies of these various digital folk cultures because it is very difficult (if not impossible) for a researcher to encounter, find, and engage with content outside of his/her own filter bubble. This is the prime challenge any researcher interested in conducting meaningful comprehensive macrocosmic studies of the digital folk cultures in India and those interested in conducting microcosmic studies of those digital folk cultures which exist far away from the filter-bubbles of the conventional (privileged) academic scholars in India face.

In a context where the internet has become a powerful tool for the propagation of culture and there is this serious problem in studying it, this paper aims to provide a rudimentary model of a comprehensive Archive+ Resource that can be created and tapped into for accessing digital folk cultural texts and other relevant contextual materials to study the different aspects of the digital folk cultures existing in India. There are three basic problems that need to be addressed to resolve this challenge, the first is a lack of access to important primary digital folk cultural texts, the second is a lack of relevant contextual information about these texts which is needed to make sense of it for people outside that bubble i.e., its immediate community of participants, and third is a lack of authoritative reliable scholarly analysis and commentary relating to these digital folk cultural texts, trends, etc.

### **The Solution**

In order to address the above issues, this paper proposes the formation of a comprehensive Archive+ resource which can be a compendium of three sister websites addressing these individual problems under a single parent project. The working title of the project can be the Indian Internet Cultures Project (IICP) and the three websites constituting it can be (tentatively) called the Indian Digital Folk Archive, the Indian Digital Folk-Pedia and the Indian Digital Cultures Pro.

The following sections will briefly explore some aspects (like the model, intent, principles, software etc.) of all the three individual websites.

## WEBSITE 1: Indian Digital Folk Archive

The first website in the three-website collection – referred to in this paper as the Indian Digital Folk Archive is the media archive/repository part of the project. Indian Digital Folk Archive would aim to document the Indian digital folk cultures through a comprehensive collection of crowdsourced viral digital folk cultural texts including memes, viral videos, viral images, audio, gifs, etc. This will be a crowd-sourced endeavour where the texts will be uploaded along with crowdsourced folksonomy tags denoting important textual and contextual information relating to the text like the details of the theme, physical geographical location(s) of its circulation, subject, language, topic, date, platform it was circulated on, and other details. Folksonomy, also known as collaborative tagging, refers to the “classification system in which end users apply public tags to online items, typically to make those items easier for themselves or others to find later” (Wikipedia contributors, “Folksonomy”). Here, tags applied by one person are visible to all the other users viewing that content. This makes the classification/categorisation and discovery of content via shared tags simple and convenient for all the users on the platform. The users and contributors on this website will be able to add new tags, modify tags or delete (misleading or inaccurate) tags to the images through the EDIT TAGS option near the media text.

A search box on the website will enable these texts to become searchable by the identifiers through these folksonomy tags. Along with this, this website will be run on wiki software. Wiki software is a collaborative software which enables open-editing on web pages. Any user with a web browser can edit and modify a wiki page. Along with this, wiki software also allows the linking of various pages run on a wiki-based website through internal links created through hypertext. This along with the folksonomy tags assigned to different texts will enable inter-connections between different kinds of texts with similar tags to exist and become searchable and navigable in the database through the search box. This database/repository will also be searchable through media type, categories, and tags.

The Indian Digital Folk Archive website draws inspiration from and is roughly modelled on the Wikimedia Commons project. Wikimedia Commons is a crowdsourced online repository of free-use images, sounds, and other media files owned by the Wikimedia Foundation. The media hosted on Wikimedia Commons is freely licensed which allows it to be used by anyone and for any purpose. Just like the Wikimedia Commons project, the Indian

Digital Folk Archive website will be run and maintained by the contributions of the volunteers coming from the common people who belong to these various digital folk communities.

This website would be open to everyone who participates in different capacities in the Indian digital folk cultures – the creators, the viewers, the viewer-distributors, the spin-off creators, etc. The original content creators would be encouraged to upload their popular creative works. Increasing their reach could be a driver for this (like it is on Wikimedia Commons). When they upload their work on the site, they will continue to own the copyright for their work and can choose to license it under Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike license (CC-BY-SA) which allows others to modify and create derivative works from the original copyrighted work as long as they give credit to the original creator and license the modified/derivative work under identical license (Senack) or they can choose any other liberal license of their preference.

The Digital Folk Archive website will solve the problem of lack of access to texts outside of one's own filter bubble and will enable an academic or any other curious/interested person to look at what the popular kinds of texts being created and circulated in different geographical locations in the country at different points of time, in different languages, etc. on a particular topic are, along with enabling a first-hand access to the raw content of these texts for research purposes. This will enable studies of how different parts of the country and different sections of the society understand, engage with, and react to different kinds things happening in our country, culture, etc. For example, the diverse memes that were created and circulated during the COVID 19 pandemic (and the subsequent lockdown and unlock in India) in different parts of the country by different sections of the society, make for a fascinating case study of how different sections of India look at, understand and engage with the same issue very differently and it is also great for understanding the nature of the co-existence of the different digital folk cultures existing in India today.

## WEBSITE 2: The Digital Folk-Pedia

The second website in the three-website consortium is called The Digital Folk-Pedia. This website is going to be made up of pages/articles containing a summary of all the factual information about all the noteworthy topics/things associated with digital folk culture(s) of India like viral trends, memes, videos, gifs, challenges, catchphrases, personalities, etc. It will contain meaningful contextual information as well as other significant information about a noteworthy text's or trend's origin, evolution, appropriation, derivative works, and spin-offs from it, etc., so that any viral text or trend can be made sense of by the people outside of its immediate community of participants. Basically, this website aims to make these digital folk cultural phenomena accessible to people outside of its immediate community of participants.

The Digital Folk-Pedia website draws its inspiration from two websites. The first website is called Know Your Meme (KYM) which is an American commercial enterprise containing a website and video series which does research on and documents the origin and evolution of various internet phenomena, including memes, viral videos, internet celebrities, etc. One crucial way in which our proposed website is going to be different from Know Your Meme is that on our website the research, documentation, and writing about the cultural texts and other digital folk cultural phenomena would be done by volunteer contributor-editors, unlike in the case of Know Your Meme where the research and publishing is done mainly by their own editorial staff. Even though Know Your Meme does offer the option for users of their website to submit memes and other viral phenomena for research and contribute in research and discussion, their practices are not very open or collaborative as it is their editorial staff that undertake all the consequential work and decision making.

The other website that The Digital Folk-Pedia draws its inspiration from is Wikipedia – the free online encyclopedia. Like Wikipedia, our proposed website is also going to be a crowdsourced endeavour where volunteer contributor-editors would create and manage the articles on these information pages. This website will also be run on Wiki software (just like the first Archive website of the project) which would enable open and collaborative wiki-based editing. All the pages on different subjects will be linked to each other through the use of hypertext (in the form of wikilinks) on the similar aspects of their content which would enable multi-dimensionality in accessibility and a rich network of content to emerge. The pages and content on this website will be searchable through the Search box on the website.

The contributor-editors on this website would be able to participate and contribute in many ways – apart from creating new pages on a new topic/text, they could also edit existing pages to update them, improve them and/or correct grammatical and other typos, etc. They can also suggest advanced actions (to be taken by the Administrators) like report vandalism, report problematic contributor-editors for blocking, suggest pages for deletion, for giving protected status, for removing protected status, etc. Along with this, they would also be able to contribute through translating pages, and through offering legal and technical assistance.

Two crucial ways in which this website is going to be different from Wikipedia is that first, Wikipedia does not allow any original research and relies on other published sourced for building up the information contained on all the pages. This is not a tenable stance for our proposed enterprise because (barring a few exceptions) most of the digital folk cultural texts and trends are rarely written about in the traditional media. The volunteer contributor-editors will have to figure out important information from their own experiences as participants in their particular digital folk communities. Second crucial difference between Wikipedia and the Digital Folk-Pedia is in the notability aspect. All subjects in order to be deemed suitable to merit a Wikipedia page have to meet a certain standard of notability. Our standards of notability are going to be very different – much lower than that of Wikipedia. For any subject to make a cut to be eligible for an entry in Wikipedia, it has to have multiple articles in reputed newspapers and/or other publications. In our case, this is not a suitable proposition as the major portion of the digital folk content,,due to technological, social and historical factors do not have the cross-media effect needed to be written about in the traditional media in India. In such a scenario, the decision of noteworthiness of any particular text or trend will have to be left to the individual and collective judgement of the volunteer contributor-editors belonging to those digital folk communities.

As far as the issue of Copyrights is concerned, the copyright will be owned by the contributor-editors who create that page and by the Digital Folk-Pedia community as a whole. The content on the website can be licensed under a liberal copyright license like the Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike license (CC-BY-SA) or any other similar suitable license for educational and other non-commercial purposes.

### **WEBSITE 3: Indian Digital Cultures Pro**

The third website in the compendium can be called the Indian Digital Cultures Pro. This website is an advanced resource – a knowledge centre containing reliable research about the internet cultures in India with a special focus on the digital folk cultures. This will contain comprehensive scholarly and authoritative analysis and commentary on the different aspects of these internet cultures. A substantial part of its research work would be built up on the works compiled on the first two websites of this compendium.

The primary contributors on this website will be academics, scholars, and researchers hailing from different disciplines interested in doing cutting edge research on the internet cultures in India. This is the 'Plus' part of the Archive+ resource. This will be a knowledge centre for people interested in understanding and/or undertaking research in the digital cultures in India and especially, in the digital folk cultures.

This will be the place where academics interested in this area of research can come together, plan projects together and contribute individual research works as well as collaboratively created academic works relating to the different aspects of the digital folk cultures of India. These macrocosmic studies could relate to the larger trends in the area, its implications, the developments in digital folk in relation to the wider media-sphere in the country, etc. Editorialising will happen on this website of the project and this is what makes the Indian Digital Cultures Pro website distinct from the previous two websites of the project.

This website would also focus on the creation of resources on some fundamental aspects of the internet in India (like for example, a booklet on the socio-economico-geographico-linguistico-demographic evolution of the Internet in India, the evolution of the different kinds of media content on the Internet in India, the difference/relation between the traditional media content and the content on the Internet, etc.) which will empower the younger generation of researchers by building up their fundamental knowledge base and enable them to study, write about, analyse, and theorise contemporary digital folk history/histories.

The Indian Digital Cultures Pro website draws inspiration from the nature of the content created and hosted on the website of the Institute of Network Cultures (INC). Institute of Network Cultures is an Amsterdam based research institute part of the Amsterdam



University of Applied Sciences founded in 2004 by the media theorist and internet critic Geert Lovink. The researchers associated with INC explore and identify emerging critical areas in network cultures and produce cutting edge theoretical research on its various aspects. Some of the aspects they focus on includes image cultures, revenue models in the arts/Moneylab, multidisciplinary engagements in politics/activism and the new media, design elements, knowledge production in the digital age, etc. INC is interdisciplinary in character and it also focuses on establishing sustainable research networks by bringing together researchers, artists, activists, programmers, designers, and students and teachers (INC, "About"). It makes a very critical contributions in building a body of work through its publications that becomes crucial in forwarding the understanding of these critical internet cultures.

The Indian Digital Cultures Pro website would aim to do something similar for the Indian context. It will aim to bring together researchers, develop ideas for and collaborate on different research projects on the digital cultures, and publish their research in different formats like essays, books, blogs, booklets, videos, etc. It would also contain a section to solicit proposals from people beyond the immediate community of researchers for areas and topics to be studied, analysed, and theorised in a series like Theory on Demand. This website could be managed by a small core team of researchers who supervise various ongoing projects and facilitate collaborations between different researchers on various research topics.

This would be a moderated academically robust space where the creation and publication of research will undergo the same kinds of processes (like mandatory peer-review, etc.) that research is subjected to offline to ensure the quality of content created and published on the website. Therefore, senior professors and researchers interested in this area will also be encouraged to join this endeavour.

The copyright for the content created and put on the website will lie with their authors and they can choose to license it under the Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike license (CC-BY-SA) or any other license they deem fit for enabling their works to be used for educational and other non-commercial purposes.

## Conclusion

The project and its constituent websites can evolve over time in response to the user's response and other insights coming from the practical running of the project.

Finally, for this project to succeed, it will be absolutely necessary to ensure that it is available in as many Indic languages as possible as around 88% of our population does not speak English (2001 Census). Along with this, an app for this entire project will also have to be launched where its interface, design elements, uploading and editing processes, creating the profile, applying folksonomy tags, etc. will have to be made simple and intuitive and will have to be optimized to give a smooth experience on the mobile device because for the vast majority of the country, mobile phones are not just the primary device for internet access but are also the only device for internet access.

The consortium of these three websites would be the go-to place to gain information about the digital folk cultures in India as between the three of them, they will contain a wide range of information about most things which are noteworthy in the digital folk cultures in India. It will also go a long way in increasing the general level of digital cultural literacy and a critical awareness about the nature of the medium and the nature of content on the medium. In the absence of a project of the scope discussed in this paper, there is a very real possibility of many embedded issues of this area of development being rendered invisible and it beginning to wield a kind of subliminal power which can become almost impossible to contest due to a lack of critical concepts and formulations to understand its functioning, its history, its modes of impact etc. The implementation of this project will be a solid contribution in enabling the creation of critical body of work which will help in the furthering of understanding and engagement with the developments in our culture.

A testament to the importance of a project described in this paper can also be gauged from the fact that the one of the websites this project seeks inspiration from – Know Your Meme was in 2014 made a part of the Web Archiving Program of American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress in the USA (Saylor). Undertaking this project will be an epic enterprise that is necessary to do justice to the epic diversity and its contemporary expressions in the digital folk cultures of our country.

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