Visual Media and Cultural Preservation:

A Deep Dive into the Moolnivasi Dharohar Open-air Street Gallery

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Introduction

The central research question guiding my project is: *How can the rich cultural heritage of the Warli, Kokna, and Dhodia tribes of Dadra and Nagar Haveli (D&NH), India, be effectively documented and preserved amid rapid urban development and societal changes?*

As a resident of D&NH, I have cherished memories of vibrant tribal festivals and cultural celebrations that were integral to our community. Over the years, I witnessed a gradual decline in these traditions.

My thesis posits that creating accessible, public representations of these indigenous cultures through multimedia projects can bridge the growing disconnect between the tribes and the broader community, fostering appreciation and encouraging preservation efforts.

Engaging with Cultural Preservation and Representation

This project engages with themes of cultural heritage preservation, the impact of urbanization on indigenous communities, and the importance of public accessibility in cultural representation. Specifically, it focuses on the underrepresented voices of the Warli, Kokna, and Dhodia tribes in D&NH, whose rich traditions and customs are at risk of fading due to neglect by individuals in power, migration, and shifts toward urban lifestyles.

For decades, D&NH was a vibrant tapestry of indigenous culture, with festivals and traditions integral to its identity. However, factors such as the influx of migrants from neighboring states and the local government's prioritization of urban development have led to a dilution of this heritage. The discontinuation of cultural festivals like the Tarpa Festival, reduced participation of tribal artists in national events, and the demolition of the Silvassa Tribal Museum have exacerbated this disconnect.

By initiating the Moolnivasi Dharohar Gallery project, I aim to shed light on these issues and prompt a necessary conversation about the importance of respecting and nurturing the artistic endeavors within these communities. The project seeks to bridge cultural gaps and inspire renewed appreciation for indigenous voices through multimedia representations, including documentary film and photography.

Research and Fieldwork

To authentically connect with the communities of D&NH, I undertook extensive research and preparations. Initially, I reviewed online articles and videos about the three tribes but found them lacking in depth regarding cultural practices and traditions. A pivotal moment in my research was discovering Dr. Reshma Hussain's book, *Dadra and Nagar Haveli: A Study in Tribal Resurgence*, published in 1986. This work offered a comprehensive view of the territory's history through the lens of its tribal heritage, providing valuable insights for my field research.

Engaging directly with the tribes presented significant challenges. The idea of an outsider wanting to learn about them was unfamiliar, leading to initial distrust and suspicion of political motives. Years of political manipulation had made these communities wary. Building trust required persistence, transparency about my background, and a clear explanation that the project

was about them, not for personal gain. Through this approach, I was able to conduct informal interviews and have meaningful conversations.

Finding families that still practiced traditional ways, especially among the Dhodia tribe, was difficult due to their transition to contemporary lifestyles. Utilizing my network—including guides like Jamnabhai Tumda and Pravin and Dharmesh—I located such families, even in neighboring states. Their assistance was invaluable in navigating the villages and deepening my understanding of the tribes' current realities.

Learnings from the Project

The Roots project has yielded several tangible outcomes. Phase one was the documentary film *Mauli*, focusing on the Diwali traditions of the Kokna tribe. The film was well-received internationally, winning the Best Film award at the Fine Cuts Film Festival in New York. This success validated the project's significance and provided momentum for phase two.

I learned about the profound impact of urban development on indigenous cultures and the critical importance of accessible representation. The lack of documentation and diminishing platforms for cultural expression have contributed to a disconnect between the tribes and the broader community. By making art accessible in public spaces, the project breaks down barriers and invites engagement from diverse audiences.

I also realized the power of visual narratives in fostering understanding and appreciation. Through documentary photography and film, I captured the daily lives, traditions, and customs of the tribes, creating a visual narrative that resonates widely. This approach serves both as an archive for future generations and as an educational tool that can influence perceptions and policies regarding cultural preservation.

The Moolnivasi Dharohar Gallery: Challenges and Resilience

Initially conceived as the Sanskriti Gallery, the final name was changed to the **Moolnivasi Dharohar Gallery** to more accurately reflect the essence and heritage of the indigenous communities—the term "Moolnivasi" meaning original inhabitants, and "Dharohar" meaning legacy.

After presenting the project on India China Day on September 23, the Moolnivasi Dharohar Gallery was scheduled to launch on September 30. However, just one day before the opening, an unexpected obstacle arose. Despite weeks of collaboration with a visual designer and copy editor, and finalizing the prints for display, the sidewalks and structures intended for the gallery were demolished without prior notice. The agency responsible for the space was unaware of this development. I discovered the demolition by chance while running errands in the town, witnessing construction workers dismantling the entire area where the gallery was to be showcased.

This setback was disheartening. Contemplating alternative locations, I realized that relocating the gallery would undermine its significance. The chosen site held deep meaning—it was where the old Tribal Museum once stood, symbolizing a connection to the heritage we aim to preserve. Therefore, I have decided to wait until the construction is completed, hopeful that the space will soon be restored for the gallery's intended purpose.

Anticipated Impact on the Community and Local Government

Despite this obstacle, I remain committed to the project's vision. I anticipate that the Moolnivasi Dharohar Gallery will influence the local community by reigniting interest in indigenous heritage and sparking dialogue about cultural preservation. The open-air concept

challenges traditional notions of art spaces, making cultural appreciation inclusive and accessible. By situating the gallery in a public space with historical significance, the project underscores the importance of preserving cultural sites amid urban development.

The gallery aims to impact the local government's stance on cultural preservation. Highlighting the community's interest and engagement sends a message about the importance of safeguarding cultural identity alongside modernization. The hope is that this initiative will encourage authorities to reconsider their approach and invest in preserving the region's rich heritage.

Moreover, the project empowers local artists by providing a platform for their work, instilling pride, and validating the significance of their craft. This recognition can motivate artists to continue their traditions and inspire younger generations to value and participate in their cultural practices.

Conclusion

The Roots project and the forthcoming launch of the Moolnivasi Dharohar Gallery represent a concerted effort to preserve and celebrate the indigenous heritage of Dadra and Nagar Haveli. Through dedicated research, overcoming challenges in community engagement, and resilience in the face of unexpected obstacles, the project underscores the vital importance of cultural representation and preservation.

By explicitly transitioning from the initial concept of the Sanskriti Gallery to the Moolnivasi Dharohar Gallery, the project aligns more closely with its mission to honor the original inhabitants and their legacy. This change reflects a deeper understanding and respect for the communities involved.

The experiences from this journey highlight the need for accessible platforms that bridge cultural gaps and inspire appreciation. Despite setbacks, the commitment to the project's goals remains steadfast. By fostering these connections, the project aims to ensure that the cultural legacy of the Warli, Kokna, and Dhodia tribes is honored and preserved for future generations. This initiative stands as a testament to the power of art and storytelling in uniting communities and sparking meaningful conversations about cultural identity and preservation.