

Biodiversity project sparks a folk culture revival

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Women of Chithara village in U.P. hold sessions to sing | Photo Credit: Special arrangement

For close to a decade now, the Greater Noida region has been seeing much ‘development’ — wider roads for smoother mobility between various pockets of the National Capital Region (NCR), and rapid campus construction to meet the growing demand for mushrooming universities. “How does one decide what is worth preserving?” asks Rupamanjari Ghosh, Vice-Chancellor of Shiv Nadar University (SNU), recalling a question that kept popping up in her mind through her initial years on campus, when hostels and departmental buildings were still being built. And so, in 2015, when a team headed by Jyoti Prasad Sharma, the head of the university’s Centre for Environmental Sciences & Engineering, and the School of Natural Sciences proposed to study the biodiversity of their area, she couldn’t have been happier. From 2016, a three-member team, meticulously studied and documented the flora and fauna of Chithara, a village that neighbours the campus. They followed the rules set out as part of The Biological Diversity Act 2002, which mandates that every local body needs to create and maintain a People’s Biodiversity Register (BPR). “The aim was to create a model biodiversity register for Chithara Panchayat,” says Sharma. While this resulted in them publishing

Illustrated Flora: Part of Western Uttar Pradesh and Delhi NCR Region

recently, there was another “extraordinary corollary”, as Ghosh puts it, which came from this effort. A chance discovery Last year, when Sharma’s team — which also includes Amit Kumar Tripathi, a botanist and post-doctoral research associate, and Mohd. Ahmad, a technical assistant in the same department — was conducting a biodiversity workshop with the residents of Chithara, they noticed that lived-knowledge of what grew around them, was sometimes recollected from song. Curious about this strong connect, Tripathi followed up with the gram pradhan

to know more about Chithara’s folk-song culture. He in turn put him in touch with Shivraj Singh who was well-known for his trove of knowledge of songs passed on for generations through the oral tradition. Singh had recently retired as a police constable. At first he was hesitant in sharing more than what was needed — he had participated in the biodiversity workshop and thought that was that. But after about four months of Tripathi’s perseverance, Singh warmed up to the team, inviting them to his house, sharing with them his then-nascent efforts in writing down all the songs he knew into a notebook. That was the team’s breakthrough. They took the residents’ fledgling impulse to preserve their songs, their culture, and reached out to help them formalise it. At the team’s request, different communities of the village residents, each with their own set of songs for various occasions, gathered to perform for the purposes of documenting and archiving. “We just had the last such workshop earlier this week,” says Tripathi. This was with a group of Gujjar women. The documentation also includes songs of the Jatav, Koli, Brahmin, and Thakur communities. The 300 songs they have documented during this last one year, through audio-visual recordings, include the genres of Kissa (stories from history), Ragni (special to these regions of Uttar Pradesh, where the stories have a mix of prose and song, and no rhyme — the region’s own form of spoken word poetry), bhajan and aarti (devotionals), and a whole category of geet, which are specific to women’s songs. Geet would include compositions that are sung during weddings, child birth, the month of saavan, and even mundan, the hair-shaving ceremony of babies and young children. **The matter of pedagogy** Sharma, Ahmad, and Tripathi have already put together a draft of a book (titled **Traditional Knowledge: Folk Songs of Upper Doab Region of Uttar Pradesh, India**) that classifies the various strands of Chithara’s folk song traditions. Even as they are readying themselves for a November launch of the book, Sharma says they are also hoping to compile their AV recordings into an accompanying CD. For the residents of Chithara, they have prepared a non-academic version of their research, with an indexed record of all of the songs. In the meantime however, Tulika Chandra, an Associate Professor in SNU’s Department of English, with a background in linguistics, has also been studying the folk cultures of the university’s neighbourhood. From 2014-2016, she studied how the folklore and folk song traditions in Braj (a cultural region that overlaps with the political boundaries of Delhi, Jaipur, and Agra) are changing and adapting to a digital age. She recounts how one of the women residents had recorded herself singing a song for child-birth, and sent it to her daughter, who’d just delivered a baby in another city — all this via a mobile phone. Chandra’s second project, which she began at the start of this year, looks at women’s voices and expression through the folk songs that’ve existed in and around Gautam Buddha Nagar, which is now called the “industrial hub of U.P.” But as to why a team exclusively from the life sciences department went ahead with the Chithara project, which may have benefitted from the expertise of a team from a social-sciences department — especially since a robust one exists in-house — is not entirely clear. Sharma however stresses that the access and trust that his team members had already established with the residents of Chithara during the biodiversity documentation, had a lot to do with this. “Also, over the last 25-30 years, the scope of what we consider ‘biodiversity’ can be seen has having expanded,” he says — culture and ways of living, especially if related to the flora and fauna of the region, may well fall under their ambit. “Since we also focussed on the socio-economics of the region, we used the participatory rural appraisal technique, which is the standard proforma of questions that is used in a social study,” he says. While he accepts that there has been no overt collaboration with faculty or students from other departments, Ghosh separately insists that all departments are ever-ready to offer their inputs and advice to one other, offering the example of Sumantra Sengupta, a trained folk and sufi singer and the founding head of SNU’s Department of Art & Performing Art. The team’s book will be an important socio-cultural record. While the university’s apparent openness and flexibility is notable, it remains to be seen if work by SNU’s other experts in the relevant fields, will add their trained expertise to these efforts in future editions.

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