

Report on NFSC Board's Evaluation of Narikuravar/Vaagri Community Archive Project

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Contents

1	Introduction	3
1.1	Methods of Community Mobilization adopted by NFSC	3
1.2	The role of photography in fostering community unity	3
1.3	The role of video in envisioning community's aspirations	4
1.4	The role of native language and folklore in education	4
2	Report on the community gathering on January 9, 2010	4
2.1	Presenting the samples of archival materials	4
2.2	Presentation on the proposed Vaagri dictionary and descriptive grammar	5
2.3	Presentation on issues in education	5
2.4	Presentation on health issues	5
2.5	Presentation on enhancement of livelihood opportunities using documentation	6
2.6	Listening to the elders in the community	6
2.7	Listening to women in the community	6
2.8	Listening to children	6
3	NFSC board's recommendations	6
3.1	Evolving parameters of evaluation	6
	3.1.1 Appraisal of the archive	6
	3.1.2 Uses of the archived material	7
	3.1.3 Retrievability of the archived material	7
3.2	Ethical positioning	7
3.3	Writing the ethnohistory of migration of the community	7
3.4	Sustaining livelihood opportunities	8
3.5	Reconnecting the community to its kins in other parts of India	8
3.6	Initiating child focused studies and documentation	8
3.7	Leveraging on the networks	8
3.8	Bridging the archival efforts with the government welfare schemes	8
3.9	Further directions for documentation and public programs	9

Abstract

This report details the evaluation carried out by National Folklore Support Centre's board of trustees on January 9, and 10, 2010 in Chennai. The Board members visited the community archive located at the Ashakulam settlement in Villupuram town, participated in the huge community gathering, listened to the presentations made by the community members, other NGO partners, and NFSC collaborators, and discussed the future course of the project at the board meeting the next day.

1 Introduction**1.1 Methods of Community Mobilization adopted by NFSC**

NFSC aimed to mobilize the community through its publication "Vagri Material Culture". The Vagri Meet 2010, a community gathering organized by NFSC, was an outcome of the mobilization efforts taken by the organization. Towards this end, NGOs in Tamil Nadu working for the Narikuruvar community was identified and around 80 NGOs were contacted. The Narikuruvar Welfare Board and the concerned department at the Secretariat of Tamil Nadu were contacted. The field staff of NFSC visited 38 Narikuruvar settlements in the districts of Cuddalore, Villupuram, Vellore, Tiruvannamalai, in Tamil Nadu. They took the publication to the people and explained NFSC's efforts to help the community and the purpose and scope of the proposed community gathering. The "Vagri Material Culture" book was distributed in all the settlements. This way networks between the different settlements were established, which were further strengthened during the community gathering held on Jan 9th at Villupuram.

1.2 The role of photography in fostering community unity

It would be hard to imagine a technology that has had more impact on humanity than photography. Photography plays the role as a private research instrument in the subconscious nature of man and society. The many ways that photography plays a role in our society is to educate and inform, to record and preserve moments in time for generations to come, a method for illustrating different people, life styles, cultures and places, to provoke emotional feelings and perhaps change things, to advertise a way of life and much more. While documenting through photographs we may come across palatable and unpalatable events, places, people and so on. If we are to document it then we must remain true to that documentation for future generations. Since photography is the most important instrument of documentation than any other, it should convey a basic sense of truth about the society as a whole. The continued consideration of the boundaries of photography has also prompted new attention to mainstream exhibition practices of photographic collections that are an intricate part of data collection on the community. The "Vagri Material Culture", a photographic resource book on the Narikuruvas, which was an outcome of extensive research by field workers and researchers from NFSC played a great role in integrating the community. The dissemination process of the book back

to the community served as a medium to unite the fragmented community and bring them under one roof to address their issues at the “Vagri Meet 2010”.

1.3 The role of video in envisioning community's aspirations

Video plays a major role in helping a community envision its culture and in creating resources for future generations. There are some aspects of culture that every community wishes to preserve and sustain, thereby building an identity for themselves. During NFSCs field work with the Narikuravas, they were insistent that certain aspects of their culture like religious practices be documented. These were aspects that they consider central to the self image of the community. The Narikuravas also have very strong opinions about what material should be made available outside their community, which would play a role in building a world view of the community. For instance, they opposed to certain scenes in the documentary film, “Narikuravar” made by NFSC. This constant dialogue with the community is an integral part of the documentation process undertaken by NFSC and is aimed at empowering them to play an active role in building community resources. Video thereby moves away from being a mere medium of documentation, to being a live repository of culture and value systems.

1.4 The role of native language and folklore in education

Education of Narikurava children calls for the need to include their native language Vaagri and traditional folklore in their curriculum. The lack of awareness and disregard to usage of Vaagri in mainstream schools would lead to their native language and culture becoming obsolete. Education, especially of marginalized communities should include native language and folklore to preserve the cultural integrity of the community through time. This will be immensely helpful to the next generation of Vaagri children who would get an opportunity to learn their culture as well as their mother tongue. The addition of a hitherto native language into mainstream education will give the Vaagri children a sense of self respect and lead to enhancement of competence with their mainstream counterparts. The chance of losing their mother tongue as well as rich traditional culture due to Vaagri being an unused and endangered language can also thus be eliminated.

2 Report on the community gathering on January 9, 2010

2.1 Presenting the samples of archival materials

NFSC conducted an audio visual presentation of its documentations of the Narikurava community as an introduction to the work done by the Digital Community Archive at Ashakulam. Although the meeting was chaotic and there were breaks in communication, the presentation managed to capture the attention of the community members.

2.2 Presentation on the proposed Vaagri dictionary and descriptive grammar

A presentation on “Building a Vagri Lexicon and writing a descriptive grammar” based on oral resources was held by Retd. Prof. G. Srinivasa Varma, Department of Linguistics, Annamalai University, Chidambaram. This presentation discussed the need to conduct elaborate fieldwork to document Vaagri boli and build resources for the community in their native language. The proposal to create a dictionary of Vaagri boli, using folk tales and descriptive grammar, was shared with the community. An interactive discussion took place thereafter where the community members voiced their opinions about how their language should be documented. To accommodate the requirements of the wide range of people who would benefit from the creation of this Lexicon it would be wise to include all these scripts to denote the Vaagri word and in the process making it as simple as possible. Therefore every Lexical entry would have seven categories which would be as follows:

1. The head word in Roman script with suitable diacritic marks.
2. The grammatical classification.
3. The Vaagri word in Devanagari script.
4. The equivalent word in Gujarati.
5. The Vaagri word transliterated in Tamil script.
6. The meaning in Tamil.
7. The meaning in English.

2.3 Presentation on issues in education

Kalyani Rajaram, the Project Director of Hand-in-Hand, an organization working for the welfare of the marginalized communities conducted an audio-visual presentation on issues in education pertaining to the Narikuravas. She shared the experience of the organization in their attempts to provide education to the Narikuravas and presented various case studies. The challenges involved in this task and the need to mainstream the community were also discussed.

2.4 Presentation on health issues

A presentation on “Health Issues” was conducted by Purushothaman, the Director of Kalaiselvi Karunalaya Social Welfare Society. The presentation dealt with the lives of urban and rural Narikurava communities. A documentary on adolescent rag pickers from the Narikurava community was screened. Various urban and rural diseases and the many health risks faced by the Narikuravas were also discussed.

2.5 Presentation on enhancement of livelihood opportunities using documentation

Nirmala Sridhar from Artserv, an NGO based in Chennai held a presentation on bead making and the various ways to enhance this skill and market it to empower the Narikurava women. The session discussed the type of beads that are available in the market, popular jewellery designs, marketing tips and ways to connect with a mainstream network. Members from the community were invited to participate in the discussion and both men and women voiced their views on the same.

2.6 Listening to the elders in the community

The community gathering also included an interactive session where the community elders spoke about the major challenges faced by the community. The loss of traditional systems of social organization, with the breakup of their clan hierarchies was one of the major issues raised. Interference with cultural systems through bans on various religious practices like buffalo sacrifice was also pointed out. The need to revitalize inherent social and cultural order was reiterated by the elders. The lack of leadership and unity among the community and the need to document and legitimize their language was also discussed.

2.7 Listening to women in the community

The Narikurava women voiced their need for more educational opportunities at the community gathering. They also pointed out the need for training and marketing opportunities. They were also appreciative of NFSCs previous initiative [Ashakulam Narikurava Skill Enhancement Programme (ANSEP)] in training them in bead making.

2.8 Listening to children

Narikurava children, who comprised a good proportion of the crowd, also got a chance to participate in the community gathering. A few children spoke about their dreams and aspirations apart from the cultural program they performed for the crowd towards the end of the Vaagri Meet.

3 NFSC board's recommendations

3.1 Evolving parameters of evaluation

NFSC board suggested that certain parameters be developed for the evaluation of archives. These parameters were identified as appraisal of the archive, the uses and retrievability of the archival material.

3.1.1 Appraisal of the archive

The appraisal of the archives includes an analysis of the integrity of the archival material, taking into consideration both physical conditions and maintenance of the archives as well as the quality of the content of the material.

3.1.2 Uses of the archived material

How the archived material is put to use is an important aspect in the evaluation of an archive. In the Narikurava archive, the documented material has been put to many uses. The documentary films made by NFSC were screened at the archive and the community's responses were taken into account. Through this process we found that some aspects of their cultural practices like the buffalo sacrifice cannot be screened in public without legal complications. This helped us understand that the community should be involved not just in the documentation but also in the editing process. Community documentation is a step towards helping the community in envisioning their own culture.

We also organized a World Gypsy Music concert with Oliver Rajamani. Apart from entertainment, the concert was also an attempt to understand the migratory history of the community. Through their response to the various tunes from around the world, a certain Middle-eastern and Mediterranean trend to their music was identified. Along with language, music also acts as markers of migration. A documentation of children's games was also carried out in association with the Dakshinchitra students and Prof. Peter Claus. This was screened in schools and the children's responses to this were studied. These initial experiments at the school in Ashakulam gave further direction for NFSC's work with the community beginning with the theater workshops held by our field staff Manivannan for the children. Language collection is another important aspect of our work with the Narikurava community. The vocabulary that has been collected by our field workers Sindhu and Lavanya is now being compiled for a dictionary for Vagri boli. The creation of the Vaagri dictionary will be done using folk tales and descriptive grammar which will be collected after conducting fieldwork among the community. This dictionary will be an important step forward for the community.

3.1.3 Retrievability of the archived material

Retrievability of the archived material is an important marker in the evaluation of the archive. The archived material has to be available in the native language to ensure accessibility of the resources to the community members

3.2 Ethical positioning

The board cautioned that the ethical stand of NFSC on the social issues concerning the Narikuravas has to be made clear. As we work towards mobilizing the community, their expectations from the organization also increase. Therefore it must be made clear that NFSC does not work towards social engineering but instead try to enable communities to empower themselves.

3.3 Writing the ethnohistory of migration of the community

Writing the ethnohistory of the Narikuravas, a nomadic community will help understand how communities evolve over an extended period of time. The ethno history of the community would trace out the origin and culture of this diaspora and also help fill in gaps in the history of the places they have come from. This study would help identify whether such an evolution of a nomadic

community takes place through structural changes or through external agencies which bring about change. NFSC board recommended that a detailed documentation of ethnohistory be included as a part of NFSC research design for the Narikurava community.

3.4 Sustaining livelihood opportunities

Enhancing livelihood opportunities is another task that NFSC has initiated for the Narikurava community. This calls for the identification of skills and the development of projects to enhance them. Currently the projects that have been identified are:

1. Bead making empowerment scheme
2. Documentary on Medicinal Herbs

NFSC aims to initiate these projects and to form a committee with the community members and NGOS that can take over the project and work towards the development of social welfare.

3.5 Reconnecting the community to its kins in other parts of India

As a part of building cultural resources, it is important to develop links between Vagri communities in different parts of India. Apart from mobilizing the community such networking will also provide great scope for ethnographic studies.

3.6 Initiating child focused studies and documentation

Child focused studies is a growing discipline in Anthropology and ethnography. Such a study on the Narikurava community will yield interesting results. Following Gabriele Alexs work with Narikurava children and Ksheerasagar's work with the Jenukuruba tribe of Mysore, child focused study of the Narikurava tribe will be undertaken.

3.7 Leveraging on the networks

NFSC has already established extensive networks with different groups working for the Narikurava community. These networks have to be developed further and used effectively to help the community. One of the primary objectives is to use these networks to help in the education of Narikurava children. Teachers and schools have to be sensitized about the role of the native language in education. Mainstreaming of the Narikurava children must not lead them to abandon their native language and culture but enhance their competence.

3.8 Bridging the archival efforts with the government welfare schemes

NFSC aims to work as a facilitating body to connect the community to the government and help them access the government welfare measures. This can

be achieved through NFSC's networking with the government departments and other groups working for the Narikuravas.

3.9 Further directions for documentation and public programs

There are various projects being planned for the Narikurava digital community archive beginning with dissemination of hundred copies of 'Vagri Material Culture' to other districts of Tamil Nadu. An exhibition on the wide variety of cages made by the Narikuravas is on the anvil. Depending on the response to the exhibition, attempts will be made to open a Narikurava artefacts shop at Dakshinachitra. Efforts to isolate and document traditional bead designs of the Narikuravas will also be undertaken. The NFSC board recommended a study to be carried out on the Narikurava communities living on the border areas of Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh and document the three day festival that takes place in a village called Nagari on the Andhra border during the Tamil month of Chitthirai.