

Oral Tradition for Development Communication

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Abstract

This paper is about oral tradition for development communication. Communication is an integral part of oral tradition. The cardinal issue is having the spoken language as the mode of communication. The social customs of the society is transmitted from one generation to the next generation by using verbal communication. It is through oral tradition the social-cultural repository of societies is transmitted from generation to generation. The social-cultural repository is represented in the social frame which serves as the guiding cardinal principle in social interaction, social relationships and activities of societies. The social frame of oral tradition has the capacity to contribute towards improving the present system of development planning and implementation.

Keywords: oral tradition, communication, social frame, social-cultural, repository, development.

Introduction

Oral tradition is a rare subject for discussion in workshops related with development planning and implementation. The inclusion of oral tradition can be seen as a positive indication in development discourse and particularly in the context of development discourse related with indigenous or tribal societies. In the paper the focus is about Oral Tradition for Development

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Communication¹. Before delving into the subject matter, it is important to take into account that the history of human societies provides an interesting exposition on the diversities of development found among human societies. Broadly, it can be observed that there are societies who in the course of history have developed the written script and have developed the system of communication both forms: oral and written. There are societies which are struggling to develop their own written script.

Another dimension which is related with oral tradition is communication. Communication is an integral part of oral tradition. The social existence of human societies depended on communication. It is through communication verbal, signs or written daily life is conducted with lesser confusion. Communication is real as social actors composing the society are real; and social actors' interaction is based on communication. Communication is an essential ingredient to keep society functioning and social actors performing various tasks.

The cardinal issue is having the spoken language as the mode of communication. Without a language, it becomes incomprehensible for any kind of communication between two or more social actors. Language is linked with the human mind. The human mind in all its senses is the critical factor for human existence and it is also the bases of separation between human from animal. It is the human mind that uses symbols and classification of 'things' in social world and nature; and according to Levi Strauss (in Leach 1974:45), 'the special marker of symbolic thought is the existence of spoken language in which words stand for (signify) things "out there" which are signified'. Thus, mind and language form the very basis for communication among social actors; and metaphorically speaking language is the 'heart and soul' of oral tradition. As language is

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the symbolic signifier it cannot be separated from oral tradition. Oral tradition and communication are embedded into one body. Without language there can be no oral tradition, language serves as the communicative link between the mind and social existence; and it also provides for the understanding of oral tradition among living social actors. According to Burke (1993) language 'shapes the society in which it used' (in Aryal 2009:65).

Coming back to oral tradition, before the invention of writing, oral tradition was the only mean and the most vital form of communication for human beings. It was observed by Martins (2012:160) that 'oral tradition is as old as human beings, for before the invention of writing, information was passed from generation to generation through spoken words. Many people around the world continue to use oral traditions to pass knowledge and wisdom'. It is through verbal communication oral tradition has been made possible in transmitting and supporting diverse social and physical activities in human societies. This mode of communication continues despite modern literacy and modern forms of communication such as the internet.

Oral tradition is a vast subject-matter; however, keeping the objective of the paper in mind it would examine the significance and relevance of oral tradition in relation with development communication. The sources of information have been drawn from secondary sources and from the field experience of the author who had been engaging with societies of the North-East India for more than twenty years. On the basis of such information the paper has drawn an analytical view of the subject-matter discussed.

The Social Frame of Oral Tradition

When referring to oral tradition, it is usually associated with societies who have language without a written script or societies with a written script and still depending on oral tradition. Before proceeding further in the discussion, an attempt is made to define oral tradition. According to available materials, oral tradition has

been defined in many different ways. Oral tradition can be seen as ‘documents of the present also inheriting a message from the past’ (Vandina, in Aryal 2009). In the views of Rosenberg, 1988 (in Aryal 2009) oral tradition ‘is the transmission of cultural items from one member to another, or others. Those items are heard, stored in memory, and, when appropriate, recalled at the moment of subsequent transmission’. In the observation of Martins (2012:159), ‘oral tradition as a term applies to a process of transmission of facts from one individual to the other through oral message which are based on previous information’. Thus, one can say that oral tradition is the process of transmission and it covers wide range of knowledge, wisdom, morals, norms, customs, beliefs and practices including other cultural elements intrinsic to the society from one generation to the next generation. Secondly, oral tradition can be separated broadly into three categories: societal; village; and clan and domestic groups. This separation is essential because of the fact that there are aspects of oral traditions which are common at the societal level; and there are oral traditions which are specific to the village or the clan and domestic groups.

According to Martins (2012), oral tradition ‘covers wide range of subject matter and can be found in a variety of forms’. To be able to comprehend oral tradition from holistic dimension, it is important to understand it from the position of social frame. If you examine any of the living indigenous/tribal societies today in the world, their continued existence spatially and socially is based on oral tradition. The conduct of social interaction and social relationship among social actors in everyday life and during extra-ordinary days such as social gatherings, ceremonies, religious festivals, etc., is governed by social norms and customs. This knowledge and practice of norms and customs is transmitted as oral tradition. On the basis of oral tradition the social order of social life is made possible including the conduct of various activities for survival.

Another aspect of the social frame is the social customs and the structure of the pattern in social life of human societies

can be observed on the basis of social institutions. According to Abercrombie, Hill and Turner (1984:216) social institutions can be said to be ‘social practices that are regularly and continuously repeated, are sanctioned and maintained by social norms, and have a major significance in the social structure’. Under social institutions five major complex institutions can be broadly identified as economic; political; religion; kinship and marriage; and cultural. The instrumental elements under each institution are shown in table – 1.

Table – 1
Social Frame of Oral Tradition

Institution	Key Domain	Instrumental Elements
Economic	Property relations, production, consumption, and distribution	Control and use of land and forest land; use of plants and wild edible plants; method and techniques of indigenous cultivation; crops and seeds collection, seeds preservation and seeds sharing; market; labour, use of water sources, seasonality calculation, wild animal, insects, etc.,
Political	Regulations and use of legitimate power	Membership status and representation; position and status of holders of authority; the practice of decision making; control and managing both territoriality and societal affairs; and authority related with customary beliefs and practices; and enforcement of regulations.
Religion	Beliefs and rituals	World views, ethics, morality, rites and rites-de-passage, religious ceremonies or festivals, rites and sacred sites; the separation of sacred and profane; and keepers, protectors and priests.

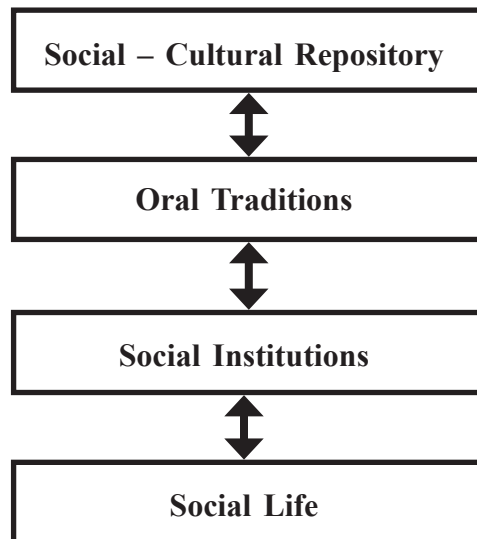
Kinship and Marriage	Descent, clan and family.	Membership and the social status and position of men and women; the separation between kinsmen and non-kinsmen; customary rules and regulation of exchange of mates; customary beliefs and practices related with inheritance of property; and the socialisation of the young.
Cultural	Norms, knowledge and practices, arts and sports, music, dances and festivals, crafts and weaving, technology, language, ideas, etc.,	Beliefs and practices related with ecology and environment; techniques; hands-on training; folklore, legends, myths, tools and implements, ideas, language - terms, phrases, idioms, metaphors, etc,

The social customs of the society is transmitted from one generation to the next generation by using verbal communication. The verbal communication is carried out by adopting and applying different mediums such as songs, poetry, couplets, theatre, storytelling, narration, hands-on training, apprenticeship and socialisation. In oral tradition the communicator as the source of the origin in the transmission process plays an important role. In majority of oral-based societies, the holder and keeper of oral tradition and the transmission agency of the social customs and the social norms is usually the responsibility of elders of the society, elders of the clan and elders of the lineage and elders of domestic groups.² It is for this reason that elders in such societies are considered as legitimate holders and protectors of wisdom and knowledge of the social frame and thus are respected. It can be further added that it is through the elder generation that the social frame is sustained which in turn guides the nature and dynamics of social interaction and social relations of social actors in society.

² A group of people who habitually share a common dwelling and common supply of food (Goody); and it 'provide material and cultural resources needed to maintain and bring up its members' (Yanagisako).

Lastly, as an illustration, it is the social frame that has given the indigenous/tribal societies the spatial and social identity. Indigenous/tribal societies of the world in general and the spatial world of tribal societies called the North-East India in particular have for centuries lived and continued to survive without the modern state and its bureaucratic apparatus because of the existence of the social frame. Even in the context of the present day, the social frame in the form of oral tradition continues to have social relevance and significance in the life of such societies. The social frame found in such societies has some of the best practices in agro-biodiversity including rich collection of indigenous knowledge and indigenous technology which the modernist agencies can learn, adopt and apply in the modern developmental framework. The social frame can also be seen to be the protective shield in the interaction between indigenous/tribal societies with modernity and modernising forces. Thus, one can say that it is oral tradition that nurtures and shapes the social frame which in turn guides the social-cultural life of the people. In this sense, social frame is the repository of oral tradition (Chart – 1).

Chart – I
The Social Frame of Oral Tradition



Oral Tradition in Developmental Framework and Development Communication

It is proper to introduce the concept of development communication prior to the discussion on developmental framework. Development communication is a conceptual frame and it can be seen as part of development planning and implementation. According to Kaul (2011:2) “development communications are organized efforts to use communications processes and media to bring social and economic improvements, generally in developing countries”. It was further highlighted by the author (Ibid.: 17) that in the ‘new development paradigm’ development communication has focused on four issues such as: (i) “Equality of the distribution of social and economic benefits, information and education; (ii) Popular participation in development planning and execution, accompanied by decentralization of activities to the local level; (iii) Self-reliance and independence in development with emphasis on the potential of local resources; and (iv) Integration of traditional with modern systems, so that development is a syncretisation of old and new ideas, with the exact mixture somewhat different in each locale”. However, development communication as proposed in the new development paradigm is a challenge to many developing countries.

On the issue of development communication as a concept proper conceptual clarity is required. Development communication according to the report of the working committee on ‘Communication in Support of Development’ organised by the International Broadcast Institute at Cologne in 1973 (as cited in Moemeka 1989:3) has outlined three aspects: (i) “Development: The improvement of the well-being of the individual and the betterment of the quality of his or her life; (ii) Communication: The transfer of information between individuals or groups of individuals by human or technical means; (iii) Development Support Communication: The systematic use of communication in the planning and implementation of development”.

In the volume, *Development Communication Sourcebook: Broadening the Boundaries of Communication*, the author, Paolo Mefalopulos (2008:8) has cited two sets of definition derived from the Development Communication Division of the World Bank which considers development communication as “an interdisciplinary field based on empirical research that helps to build consensus while it facilitates the sharing of knowledge to achieve positive change in development initiatives. It is not only about effective dissemination of information but also about using empirical research and two-way communication among stakeholders. It is also a key management tool that helps assess socio-political risks and opportunities”.

The second definition was drawn from the First World Congress of Communication for Development, held in Rome in October 2006. According to the author the definition was a consensus decision and was defined as “a social process based on dialog using a broad range of tools and methods. It is also about seeking change at different levels, including listening, building trust, sharing knowledge and skills, building policies, debating, and learning for sustained and meaningful change. It is not public relations or corporate communication” (Ibid.).

One can say that development communication is a process of dissemination of information related with transforming and improving the lives of individuals, groups and communities. Dissemination of information can be through formal and informal mechanism, and involves different tools of communication. In development communication the process of interaction and exchange is two-way traffic between stake holders or between many social actors. The course of interaction and communication between stakeholders or social actors is reciprocal.

Coming to the discussion on the position of oral tradition in developmental framework and development communication one has to interrogate the very idea of developmental frame work. One can draw the analogy from the cinema. Hollywood known for

all its extravagance in the world of leisure and pleasure has also occasionally metaphorically dealt with serious matters concerning the survival of human race. In the context of this paper, the movie *Avatar* stands out. It stands out because of three reasons: (i) probably the first of its kind to reflect on indigenous peoples' situations; (ii) the projection of the modernist developmental agenda; and (iii) the presentation of the social frame of indigenous peoples. The ending part of *Avatar* is interesting and metaphorically I can say that the 'conquistador'³ (invaders) had to accept the defeat of their grand design of destructive-extractive development. However, in reality the story is different because oral tradition is yet to have a place in the development discourse and in the developmental framework. For an appreciative inquiry and proper understanding of the subject-matter the societies of North-East India can be an illustration.

Prior to the year 1826 meaning before the arrival and subjugation of the region under the colonial state, societies of the region were sovereign in their respective territories and conduct their social life on the basis of their social frames. As a region it has varied landscapes and with more than two hundred social frames (tribes and non-tribes). Each one is unique in its own way and distinct from another. In one sense, it is a region of complex social-anthropological aquarium of human societies. Inhabitants of the region living in their own carved-out territories have been surviving for centuries with minimal dependency on the outside world. Over generations they have developed their ways and means of survival and some of these practices are highly sustainable such as the terraced cultivation of the Angami tribe in the state of Nagaland or the wet rice cultivation of the Apatani tribe in the state of Arunachal Pradesh or the sacred forests in Khasi-Jaintia hills in the state of Meghalaya. One can cite many more examples found in the region. The continuity of such practices is located in the social frame and it is oral tradition which has provided societies

³ *conquistador* was the name given to the Fifteenth-to-Seventeenth century Spanish and Portugese soldiers who conquered much of the world, most famously the Central and Southern Americas.

of the region the capacity and the resiliency of sustaining life and nature. It is correct to say that they may not have all the indices of a modern society, however, their survival as a human race to the present day can be attributed to social frame and oral tradition.

The social frame found in societies of North – East India have their own system of economic practices, such practices have supported the socio-economic life of people for generations and it continues in the present times. Under colonialism, they were left to themselves to manage their socio-economic life as the British was hardly interested in development of the region. After the formation of India as an independent democratic nation-state, tribal societies of the region in particular were brought under various provisions of the Constitution of India. In this type of politico-bureaucratic structure North-East India became part of the five year plan model of development. In this type of development planning and implementation, societies of the region became beneficiaries of the process of development.

And from the point of view of development communication, developmental planning and implementation in India falls under the politico-bureaucratic structure and can be observed at the level of community development block. It was highlighted by Kaul (2011: 19-20) that, “the government decided that the best way to achieve the projected goals was to decentralize interpersonal communication to the community block level. Each community development block was served by a team of multi-purpose village-level workers supported by the subject matter specialists at the block level, and supervised and co-ordinated by the block development officer”. In this type of development communication structure it was a one-way traffic communication. The government functionaries disseminate only the guidelines of the government programmes and the people who are called ‘beneficiaries’ are only receivers of the information. Local context and indigenous knowledge and practices are not taken into account. This aspect was further pointed out by Kaul (2011) that in designing developmental plans or projects majority

of countries hardly give serious thought to ‘traditional and folk’ knowledge including ‘feedback and discussions’.

It can be further elaborated that for the purpose of developing the region number of strategic suggestions for implementation were made by various official reports. Some of the reports are as follows: High Level Commission Report to the Prime Minister (1997); the National Human Development Report (2002); the Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-2012), (2002); the North Eastern Region Vision 2020 (2008); and the Report of the Task Force: To look into problems of hill states and hill areas (2010). Such documents provide the official version that the region (North-East India) lack economic development and suggestions were made to overcome the developmental problems by increasing investment and incentive. The identification of developmental problems and strategies to overcome such problems was in the hands of the government. Development interventions such as infrastructural facilities, health facilities, education, flood control, landslide support system and weather forecasting, etc., became useful for the common needs of inhabitants in the hill areas as well as in the plain areas. On the other hand, there was no kind of discerning to understand how these societies have survived before the arrival of the modern state. As highlighted in the preceding description that societies of the region have various kinds of indigenously developed economic practices which are viable and has sustained these societies for generations. However, such knowledge and practices are yet to be given any consideration in development planning framework for the region. The only exception among the official reports that can be cited was the recommendation made by the Task Force (2010) which had suggested new model of development for the region (developmental zones) and guided by the ecology – the mountain perspective. This suggestion was never considered.

Coming back to the region, the social-cultural repository found in tribal/indigenous societies is yet to be fully accounted for, despite that it is so diverse and rich. Though it is a daunting task to take

cognizance of these practices which are in such societies, one can provide few examples as an illustration of the role of social frame and oral tradition in the socio-economic life of societies in the region. The examples are taken from the village of Pnar community of Jaintia hills in the state Meghalaya. The Pnar community is known for holding and keeping many kinds of indigenous knowledge and practices (Lamare 2005). The method of cultivation adopted and applied in Jaintia hills in general and in the villages in particular, were jhum cultivation, terraced cultivation, wet rice cultivation, and the indigenous method drip irrigation⁴. The cultivation of crops starting from the pre-sowing, sowing, weeding, pre-harvesting and harvesting has been based on indigenous knowledge. Indigenous agriculture was intrinsically linked to nature and accordingly the seasonal calculation has been evolved and handed down over generations.

It was observed that the community ‘to possess a top-ranked indigenous knowledge system in the utilization of the rich plant diversity around them for various purposes’ (Samati and Begum 2006). According to the description provided by Samati and Begum (2006) and Jaiswal (2010), the *Pnar* community has rich knowledge with regard to the connection between plants and ‘the agricultural seasons and their significance in agricultural activity’. The illustration in table -2 is self-explanatory.

Table – 2

Indigenous Agricultural Seasons of Pnar Community

Season	Plant indicators	Vernacular name	Significance
Pre sowing	Fagaceae	<i>Ryntiang</i>	<i>Mih sla lung</i> meaning appearance of new leaves indicates the commencement of spring

⁴ This method has been studied by many scientists and experts from across the world and is highly appreciative in the context of science of farming.

Sowing	Pinaceae	<i>Kseh</i>	Needle leaves of <i>Kseh</i> illuminate smoky vapour and has foggy appearance indicating sowing season (e.g. sow rice seeds)
Transplanting and weeding	Theaceae	<i>Shyrngan</i>	<i>Phuh syntu</i> meaning flowering of the tree indicates perfect time for transplanting of rice and weeding
Pre-harvesting	Castonis indica A. DC. C.tribuloides	<i>Skop</i> <i>Sning</i>	<i>Da mih soh</i> meaning fruiting time of these two species indicates that paddy is ready for harvesting
Harvesting	Butea buteiformis Phoenix humilis	<i>Rapalong</i> <i>Satlai</i>	<i>Phuh syntu</i> meaning fruiting time of these two species indicative of the completion of harvesting time and to protect the grains from being rotten (locally referred <i>Rdem</i>)

Source: Jaiswal, Vidhand, 2010; and Samati, Hajal and Begum, Samim Sofika, 2006.

The second example is a case study drawn from the village of Nongryngkoh. One of the interesting features about Nongryngkoh village was paddy cultivation. It was found that approximately one fourth of the village population cultivated paddy. The reason was because the village has limited paddy fields. However, the village has seventeen varieties of paddy called in local dialect such as *Khawja Shulia*, *Kba Rabon*, *Sabiah saw*, *Sabiah lieh*, *Duriaw*, *Typhot*, *Tngen*, *Mala*, *Khyrwait*, *Soohem*, *Sootang rit*, *Sootang heh*, *Pingsah*, *Kba Shdai*, *War*, *Jwai*, and *Kba Tlang*. According to the information from the village, the variety of paddy seeds was handed down over generations including the process and technique of cultivation and planting of seeds. It can be said that domestic

groups of the village have been holding, keeping and protecting the indigenous agricultural seeds and practices. However, hardly one finds any mentioning in government developmental framework.

Another aspect is wild edible plants, and such plants can be found in selected locations of the forestlands or jhum fields or agricultural fields and near to wetlands. Such plants were never cultivated but they have been growing wild and people can collect them. Wild edible plants can be collected without any restrictions and consumed as vegetable items. As an example the wild edible plants found in villages of Jaintia hills is presented in table – 3. The knowledge of identifying and collecting at particular season, and the knowledge to use such wild edible items were part of oral tradition. According to the tribals/indigenous peoples, wild edible plants have medicinal value.

Table - 3

Wild Edible Plants

Local name	Botanical name (family)	Use
Jajew	<i>Sonchus oleracea</i>	Fruits eaten raw
Slileshiat	<i>Ficus clavata</i> Wall. ex Miq. (Moraceae)	Leaves and fruits are used as vegetable
Jiakeng (J)	<i>Ilex acuminata</i> Willd. (Aquifoliaceae)	Leaves eaten as vegetable
Sohchlia	<i>Cirsium involucreatum</i>	Seeds are aromatic, eaten raw
Ja tyndong	<i>Codonopsis parviflora</i>	Leaves are cooked and eaten
Jarian	<i>Fagopyrum dibotrys</i> (D.Don) Hara. (Polygonaceae)	Tender shoots used as vegetable
Tyrkhang	<i>Diplazium esculentum</i> (Retz.) Sw. (Athyriaceae)	Fronds cooked as vegetable
Sohprew	<i>Luffa acutangula</i> (L.) Roxb. (Cucurbitaceae)	Unripe fruit cooked as vegetable

Source for botanical names: Kayang 2007, Jaiswal 2010 and Kharbuli, Kayang and Syiem 2003.

These examples conveyed the contribution of oral tradition in the social world of tribal /indigenous societies of North-East India or elsewhere in the world. In the views of Nongkynrih (2013), ‘the indigenous method of farming and technology is another set of objects representing indigenous knowledge and wisdom in sustainable food production’. He further elaborated that, ‘however, the physical world of tribal communities is being affected by the new paradigm of development and market –oriented extraction of natural resources as the mantra of poverty reduction and economic growth...’ This seems to be one of the reasons that can explain the exclusion of oral tradition from the dominant development framework of the modern state and international financial agencies.

The examples revealed that oral tradition has its own kind of contribution to the socio-economic life of the people. It also signifies that oral tradition has its own kind of meanings and significance to the life of tribal/indigenous societies. If oral tradition is irrelevant to the life and survival of tribal/indigenous societies they would have discontinued the practice ages ago. Oral tradition has its own kind of potentiality and can enrich the modern paradigm of development, provided that modern paradigm of development is willing to learn and appreciate. It is also true that modern scientific knowledge and technology has its own limitations in addressing complex issues of the social world and nature. Adopting the indigenous socio-economic practices would add to techniques of problem solving because these indigenous knowledge and practices have been experimented through trials and errors over generations, and have shown to solve some of the challenges experienced by societies particularly in those matters concerning with nature, health and food. One can argue that oral tradition can be integrated in the developmental framework and development communication. The contribution can be broadly categorised in three ways: (i) learning and documenting the rich resources available as oral knowledge and oral wisdom that deals with wide range of issues; (ii) in judiciously adopting and applying it as a participatory technique of assessment and appreciative inquiry; and (iii) in adopting, applying and improving the best practices

found in such societies. Also, it should be noted, the integration of oral tradition in developmental framework and in participatory learning and action can lead to two-way exchange of knowledge, learning and practices. In this sense, development communication in the context of oral tradition can be seen as an asset to the process of development. This is more so when taking into consideration the variety of landscapes and ecosystems inhabited by tribal/indigenous societies and where large portion of the knowledge systems and practices are still unwritten and based on oral tradition.

It has also been recognised that oral tradition has its own set of limitations with regard to the knowledge transmitted from generation to generation. However, scholars and experts gathering information based on oral tradition are aware of this problem. Seitel (2010:403) highlighted that, 'in the midst of doing field research, oral tradition scholars usually know many cultural experts with whom they can collaborate to increase their understanding and improve their representations and analyses'. Another way of addressing this issue is by applying the participatory learning and action, and interviews as techniques to discern ideas and knowledge of community elders. Lastly, information collected should undergo the process of verification by the community studied; and cross checking with written sources if available.

Conclusion

It is through oral tradition the social-cultural repository of societies is transmitted from generation to generation; and oral tradition has a spoken language or a spoken dialect which serves as the verbal mode of communication. The verbal mode of communication can be in different forms such as recitation, couplets, poetry, theatre, narration, and socialisation, etc,. The social-cultural repository is represented in the social frame which serves as the guiding cardinal principle in social interaction, social relationships and activities of societies. The social frame is the cardinal principle that provides the base of survival of tribal/indigenous societies

and continues to be so in the present times. The social frame has the capacity to contribute towards improving the present system of development planning and implementation and development communication. Will the nation-state's developmental framework integrate oral tradition in the developmental process of tribes/indigenous societies? The same goes for international development bodies and international financial institutions too.

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