



Research article

Post-Custodial Models for Indigenous Knowledge Archives in West Bengal: A Framework for Community-Centered Preservation

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Abstract

This paper explores post-custodial archival models for preserving indigenous knowledge in West Bengal. Unlike custodial systems that place records under institutional control, post-custodial approaches retain community stewardship and cultural authority. This is especially important because indigenous knowledge is relational, ecological, sacred, performative, and governed by customary protocols. With forty recognized Scheduled Tribe communities comprising about 5.8% of the state's population, West Bengal provides a significant context for this study. While the Santals are the largest tribal community, groups such as the Toto, Birhor, and Lodha remain particularly vulnerable. Drawing on post-custodial archives, participatory archiving, indigenous data sovereignty, and digital heritage platforms, this paper examines tools such as Mukurtu CMS and Traditional Knowledge Labels alongside India's Traditional Knowledge Digital Library. It argues that although TKDL supports defensive intellectual property protection, it inadequately addresses community control, sacred protocols, oral transmission, and the lived nature of indigenous knowledge. Community-led, post-custodial models are therefore more appropriate for traditions such as Santal sacred groves, Oraon medicinal practices, Birhor forest knowledge, and Toto oral heritage. The paper proposes a West Bengal framework based on community authority, culturally responsive metadata, layered access, distributed infrastructure, and benefit-sharing. It treats indigenous archives as living systems connected to land, ritual, memory, and ecological stewardship. Such a model can support cultural continuity, intergenerational transmission, and resistance to extractive archival practices. The paper recommends pilot initiatives in Purulia, Bankura, Jhargram, and Alipurduar, together with legal recognition of indigenous knowledge sovereignty in India.

Keywords: post-custodial archiving, community-centered preservation, indigenous knowledge archives, Mukurtu CMS, Traditional Knowledge Digital Library, West Bengal.



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1. Introduction: The Crisis of the “Locked Archive”

Archives are often imagined as neutral institutions and seen as places where records are collected and preserved for posterity. Yet for indigenous communities across the world, the archive has rarely been neutral. It has often functioned as a site of extraction. Songs, oral histories, ecological knowledge, ritual objects, manuscripts, images, and even human remains were removed from communities and relocated to museums, universities, and government repositories. In the process, knowledge was detached from its context, translated into administrative categories, and placed under institutional control. What was presented as preservation frequently meant dispossession. This problem is especially acute for indigenous communities because knowledge in such societies is seldom separable from land, kinship, ritual, and responsibility. A healing practice may be tied to a season, a sacred grove, a clan, or an initiation. A story may belong to elders, to a lineage, or to a ritual cycle rather than to an abstract “public.” When such knowledge enters a conventional archive, its relational meaning is often flattened. The archive keeps the record, but it loses the life-world that made the record meaningful. That is why many scholars of indigenous archives have argued that the central issue is not merely preservation, but authority: who decides what is documented, how it is described, who may see it, and for what purposes (Christen, 2012; Gilliland & McKemmish, 2019).

In the Indian context, this tension remains under-discussed in archival studies. Tribal and Adivasi knowledge has usually been approached through anthropology, folklore studies, museum collections, development reports, or biodiversity documentation. Each of these has value, but all too often the knowledge has been mediated through outsider categories. Ritual becomes “belief,” ecological practice becomes “resource use,” and oral history becomes “data.” The communities who hold this knowledge rarely control how it is recorded, classified, circulated, or reused. This raises serious ethical and political questions in a country where colonial ethnography, forest governance, and state knowledge systems have long shaped the representation of indigenous life. West Bengal provides an especially important setting for examining these questions. Here, forty ethnic groups have so far been notified as Scheduled Tribes in West Bengal; among these Tribes, Toto, Birhor and Lodha have been notified as PVTGs (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups) in terms of backwardness in different development indicators. Earlier, they were termed as PTGs (Primitive Tribal Groups). TOTOs and BIRHORs predominantly reside in Jalpaiguri & Purulia districts, respectively, whereas LODHAs are mostly found in the Paschim Medinipur District. Census 2011-linked official materials available at <https://adibasikalyan.gov.in/> indicate that Scheduled Tribes account for about 5.8 percent of the state’s population. Government information also notes that the Santal community is the largest among the state’s Scheduled Tribes. ([Scheduled Tribes Of West Bengal - Tribal](#)) These communities are not culturally homogeneous. They differ in language, ecology, ritual systems, mobility patterns, social organization, and modes of knowledge transmission. Yet they share a common vulnerability: their knowledge systems are increasingly threatened by land alienation, extractive development, migration, linguistic

erosion, digitization without consent, and the continuing dominance of outside institutions in heritage management. The knowledge traditions of West Bengal's indigenous communities are sophisticated and substantial. Santal sacred groves, often known as *Jaher Than*, embody a form of ecological governance in which ritual restriction and biodiversity protection are inseparable. Ethnomedicinal practices among Oraon, Kurmi-Mahato, Mahali, and other communities preserve local understandings of plants, fungi, soil, health, and seasonality. Oral epics, song traditions, festivals such as Baha Parab and Sohrai, wall art, craft knowledge, cattle rituals, and forest practices all operate as living archives. They are archives not because they resemble filing systems, but because they store and transmit memory, value, and technique across generations. And yet these living archives remain weakly represented in formal repositories. When represented at all, they are often framed as disappearing traditions, frozen survivals, or objects of documentation rather than as dynamic systems of knowledge governance. This is where the idea of the "locked archive" becomes useful. A locked archive is not only one that physically excludes communities. It also locks knowledge into institutional formats, locked metadata, locked legal categories, locked ownership assumptions, and locked epistemologies. It may preserve traces, but it can still silence living authority. Post-custodial archiving offers a serious alternative to this model. Rather than centering institutional possession, it emphasizes collaboration, distributed stewardship, and the retention of physical and intellectual control by communities. In this model, the archivist is not a gatekeeper but a facilitator, partner, and technical ally. The record may be digitized, described, and preserved, but authority over access, interpretation, and use remains grounded in the community. This is not only a technical shift. It is a moral and political one. It challenges the assumption that archives must own what they preserve. This paper argues that a post-custodial approach is especially well suited to indigenous knowledge archives in West Bengal. It does not claim that digital tools alone can solve the problem. Nor does it romanticize community processes as simple or conflict-free. Rather, it suggests that archival infrastructures can help sustain living knowledge systems more ethically than conventional custodial models if they are designed around indigenous protocols, local participation, and layered access. The paper therefore has three aims: first, to review the theoretical and practical literature on post-custodial archiving; second, to examine the present state of indigenous knowledge preservation in West Bengal; and third, to propose a framework for community-centered, post-custodial archiving tailored to the region.

2. Theoretical Context: From Custody to Stewardship

The custodial archive grew historically alongside the modern state, colonial administration, and the bureaucratic logic of classification. In the custodial model, records are transferred to an institution, arranged according to institutional systems, and preserved under the authority of archivists. This model assumes that long-term care requires centralized possession. It has been deeply influential in libraries, museums, and archival repositories around the world. But in indigenous contexts, this model has produced significant harm.

Records were often collected without consent, translated without accountability, and interpreted without the participation of the people whose lives they described.

Post-custodial archiving developed as a critique of precisely these assumptions. Instead of treating custody as the defining principle of preservation, post-custodial theory argues that archival responsibility can be shared and distributed. The institution may support preservation through training, digitization, metadata design, infrastructure, and capacity building without necessarily acquiring ownership or exclusive control over the material. As Christen (2012) and Gilliland and McKemmish (2019) suggest, this model is especially important in contexts where records are embedded in community relationships and where removal to a distant institution reproduces older forms of colonial appropriation. At the heart of the post-custodial approach lies a change in professional posture. The archivist is no longer the sovereign interpreter of the collection. Instead, communities become co-creators or primary stewards of archival meaning. Description may include indigenous languages, place-based identifiers, kinship affiliations, ceremonial restrictions, and multiple narratives rather than a single institutional description. Access may be layered, seasonal, or role-based. Some items may be public, others restricted, and some not digitized at all. In this sense, post-custodial archiving is not a simple extension of open access. It is a challenge to the very idea that universal accessibility is always the highest archival good. This move intersects closely with the broader discourse on Indigenous Data Sovereignty. Indigenous Data Sovereignty insists that indigenous peoples have rights over data that derive from their lands, communities, knowledge systems, and cultural practices. Local Contexts describes this in terms of reasserting cultural authority over collections and data, and emphasizes that labels and notices can communicate provenance, permissions, and protocols for access, use, and circulation. ([Local Contexts – Grounding Indigenous Rights](#)) Such frameworks matter because legal copyright alone does not capture collective ownership, sacred restriction, or obligations embedded in indigenous knowledge. Another related idea is participatory archiving. In participatory archives, communities are not passive donors but active participants in appraisal, description, curation, and dissemination. O’Neal (2015) notes that for indigenous communities, participatory archival work can also serve cultural revitalization, because the act of curating and contextualizing materials helps restore community memory and intergenerational links. This is particularly relevant where archives contain painful histories of displacement, missionization, assimilation, or state intervention.

A further step beyond participation is the idea of relational stewardship. Here the archive is not imagined merely as a storage mechanism but as part of an ongoing relation between people, objects, memory, and place. This view is important in contexts like West Bengal because many indigenous knowledge systems are not object-centered in the museum sense. Their continuity depends on practice: entering the grove at the right season, observing taboos, singing in the proper context, making wall art at the time of Sohrai, harvesting specific plants in accordance with local ecological rhythms. A post-custodial archive, if it is to be meaningful, must preserve not just content but conditions of relation. Seen this way, the question is not whether indigenous knowledge should be archived, but

how. A conventional archive asks: What can be collected? A post-custodial archive asks: What should remain with the community, what can be digitally represented, what protocols govern access, and how can preservation strengthen rather than weaken indigenous authority?

3. Literature Review

3.1 Post-Custodial Archiving and Decolonial Archival Practice

The literature on post-custodial archiving emerged partly from dissatisfaction with the colonial genealogy of many archives. Scholars have shown that records were frequently produced through asymmetrical power and later used to naturalize the authority of states, churches, and colonial administrations. In response, post-custodial practice rethinks archival work as an ethics of support rather than possession. Christen (2012) argues that indigenous archives must be understood not as dead collections but as records with afterlives that continue to matter politically, culturally, and spiritually. Gilliland and McKemmish (2019) similarly emphasize that community-based approaches are necessary when conventional custodial systems have historically excluded or misrepresented marginalized groups.

Ghaddar and Caswell (2019) deepen this critique by framing post-custodial archiving as part of a broader movement toward archival justice. In their view, the redistribution of resources, voice, and authority is not peripheral but central. It is not enough to digitize collections for communities if the institution still controls metadata, interpretive narrative, or conditions of access. The problem is not solved by access alone; it must be addressed through governance.

Punzalan and Caswell (2016), though writing more broadly about digital archiving projects, also highlight the importance of trust, community partnership, and long-term planning. Their work is useful here because it reminds us that ethical collaboration requires infrastructure, care, and sustainability. Community-led projects often fail not because communities lack interest, but because institutions seek extractive outcomes, offer only short-term support, or underestimate the labor required for digital stewardship.

3.2 Indigenous Archival Protocols and Ethical Guidelines

One of the most influential interventions in this area is the *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials* developed by the First Archivist Circle (2007). These protocols argue that archival institutions should respect tribal sovereignty, reconsider descriptive practices, acknowledge culturally sensitive materials, and create pathways for consultation and repatriation. Although developed in a Native American context, the underlying principles are widely applicable. They recognize that archives hold materials whose significance cannot be reduced to legal ownership. They also insist that description itself is political: categories, names, and subject terms can reproduce violence if they ignore community language and worldview.

This insight is particularly relevant in India, where indigenous communities are often described through administrative, caste-like, or anthropological labels that may not reflect community self-identification. Applying a protocol-driven archival model in West Bengal

would therefore require not only translation into local languages but also careful attention to naming, internal diversity, and customary norms.

3.3 Digital Platforms: Mukurtu and Local Contexts

Mukurtu CMS has become one of the most important digital tools associated with post-custodial indigenous archiving. Mukurtu developed out of collaboration with the Warumungu community in Australia and is designed to support culturally responsive access, community records, and protocol-based sharing. Its documentation emphasizes integration with Local Contexts tools, location and mapping, customizable access structures, and support for labels and notices. ([Mukurtu Docs](#)) The significance of Mukurtu lies not merely in its software architecture but in its embedded philosophy. It assumes that some materials are not universally shareable, that communities must define access, and that digital objects carry ongoing social responsibilities. Local Contexts further strengthens this ecosystem by enabling communities to apply Traditional Knowledge and Biocultural Labels. Official descriptions explain that these labels establish Indigenous cultural authority and governance over collections and data by adding provenance information, contextual metadata, protocols, and permissions. ([Local Contexts – Grounding Indigenous Rights](#)) This is crucial because many indigenous communities are less concerned with asserting private property in a conventional legal sense than with ensuring respectful use, appropriate attribution, and the honoring of customary restrictions.

The Plateau Peoples' Web Portal is often cited as a key example of how these ideas work in practice. Local Contexts notes that the portal, created in collaboration with multiple Plateau nations and Washington State University, implements TK Labels across its Mukurtu site and uses different labels for lesson plans, videos, and community materials. ([Local Contexts – Grounding Indigenous Rights](#)) The importance of this example lies in the way it distributes authority. Material is selected, narrated, and contextualized by communities themselves rather than simply displayed by institutions.

3.4 The Indian Context and the Limits of Existing Models

In India, the archival discussion around traditional knowledge has been shaped more strongly by intellectual property debates than by community sovereignty. The most prominent initiative in this regard is the Traditional Knowledge Digital Library. Official TKDL sources state that the platform was created to document Ayurvedic, Unani, Siddha, and Sowa Rigpa formulations, and that full access is restricted to patent offices under access agreements. ([TKDL](#)) CSIR materials describe TKDL as a pioneering initiative aimed at preventing biopiracy and wrongful patents on Indian traditional medicinal knowledge. ([CSIR](#)) TKDL has been effective in the defensive protection of codified medicinal knowledge, and this achievement should not be minimized. It emerged in response to well-known controversies involving patents on turmeric, neem, and related knowledge systems. However, from a post-custodial perspective, TKDL has limitations. It is state-centered, designed for prior-art defense, and focused on codified textual traditions rather than oral, ritual, land-based, or community-restricted forms of knowledge. It translates traditional knowledge into a format legible to patent systems, but that very translation can strip away

relational and cultural context. The result is protection at one level and decontextualization at another.

This distinction matters greatly in West Bengal. Indigenous knowledge there is not reducible to codified pharmacological formulations. Much of it is oral, performative, seasonal, and spatially embedded. Sacred grove knowledge, festivals, agricultural rhythms, hunting restrictions, ritual songs, and local ecological indicators cannot be adequately captured by a defensive database designed for patent examiners. Nor does such a model adequately address community consent, layered access, or benefit-sharing.

3.5 Preservation Work in West Bengal

The literature on indigenous knowledge in West Bengal has mostly concentrated on ethnography, ecological studies, folklore, and heritage safeguarding. Mahato and Das (2022) discuss sacred groves and their role in biodiversity conservation. Roy et al. (2015) document plant knowledge in local healthcare management in tribal communities. Sarkar's work on Mahali and Kurmi-Mahato communities points to the richness of ethnomycological and socio-cultural practices. UNESCO's work on West Bengal's intangible cultural heritage, especially through the Rural Craft and Cultural Hubs project, emphasizes the transmission of skills and knowledge to future generations and links heritage preservation with sustainable development. UNESCO describes the project as a long-running initiative that has helped connect living heritage with livelihood and capacity-building. ([UNESCO](#))

These efforts are valuable, but they do not yet amount to a robust post-custodial archival ecosystem. What we see instead are fragments: ethnographic documentation here, museum initiatives there, craft transmission elsewhere, defensive IP protection at the national level, and local cultural revitalization efforts that often lack digital infrastructure. There is a major gap between preservation discourse and community-controlled archival practice.

4. Research Gaps

The first and most obvious gap is the absence of explicit post-custodial archival applications in the Indian tribal context, especially in West Bengal. There is substantial literature on indigenous data sovereignty, participatory archiving, and protocol-based access in North America and Australia. There is also a growing body of work on decolonizing archives more generally. But there are almost no published studies that systematically adapt these frameworks to Adivasi communities in eastern India.

The second gap concerns digital archiving itself. Community museums, locally managed cultural centers, and externally funded digitization efforts do exist, but they often remain hybrid in an uneven way. Technology, funding, classification logic, and community involvement are external, with communities serving primarily as informants rather than decision-makers. The community rarely retains full intellectual control.

Third, existing Indian models of traditional knowledge protection prioritize legal defensiveness rather than cultural governance. TKDL is the clearest example. It protects against biopiracy, but it does not create a community-led archive of oral histories, rituals, songs, or local ecological governance. It is therefore poorly equipped to address the broader preservation crisis facing tribal knowledge in West Bengal.

Fourth, there is a lack of pilot studies and empirical experimentation. We do not yet have serious evaluations of what a Mukurtu-style or protocol-based archival platform would look like in districts such as Purulia, Bankura, Jhargram, Paschim Medinipur, Birbhum, Jalpaiguri, or Alipurduar. Nor do we have tested models for multilingual metadata involving Santali, Kurukh, Sadri, Toto, Bengali, and English.

Finally, the literature often identifies threats such as modernization, migration, climate stress, language shift, and generational discontinuity, but stops short of designing community-controlled archival responses. In other words, the diagnosis is increasingly clear, but the archival prescription is missing.

5. Indigenous Knowledge Systems in West Bengal as Living Archives

To understand why a post-custodial approach matters, one must first recognize the character of the knowledge being discussed. Indigenous knowledge in West Bengal is not a residual body of “tradition” waiting to be recorded before it vanishes. It is a living and adaptive archive. It exists in ritual, memory, material practice, ecological observation, food systems, seasonal movement, healing, visual forms, and oral transmission.

5.1 Santal Knowledge Systems

The Santals are the largest tribal community in West Bengal according to official state information. ([Adibasikalyan](#)) Their knowledge traditions are deeply connected to land, forest, agriculture, and ritual cycles. The sacred grove or *Jaher Than* is one of the clearest examples. It functions simultaneously as a ritual site, an ecological refuge, and a community memory space. The grove is not just symbolically sacred. Its protection is governed through taboos, ritual observances, and social restrictions that help preserve local biodiversity. Studies on sacred groves in West Bengal suggest that such sites contribute to ecological conservation while also preserving community identity and cosmology (Mahato & Das, 2022).

Festivals such as Baha Parab and Sohrai are also archival in this sense. They preserve knowledge about seasons, fertility, flowers, livestock, community hierarchy, and the reciprocal relationship between humans and nature. The point is not simply that these festivals are “heritage.” Rather, they are recurring frameworks for transmitting values and practices. Songs, gestures, body movement, ritual language, and food practices all carry memory. If these are documented without attention to their ritual context, the resulting archive may preserve form but not meaning.

5.2 Oraon, Munda, and Related Knowledge Traditions

Oraon and Munda communities in West Bengal similarly preserve extensive forms of local ecological and medicinal knowledge. Such knowledge may include plant use, healing methods, agricultural adaptation, social memory, and forms of oral instruction embedded in everyday life. Some of this knowledge intersects with forest landscapes and community land-use practices. In official demographic summaries, Oraons are among the major Scheduled Tribe communities in the state. Yet their knowledge systems remain far less visible in state archival infrastructures than in academic studies.

5.3 Birhor, Lodha, and Other Particularly Vulnerable Communities

Government information identifies the Birhor and Lodha among the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups in West Bengal, alongside the Toto. ([Adibasikalyan](#)) This status is important because it points to the urgency of cultural and linguistic preservation. For communities with small populations or histories of marginalization, the risk is not merely under-documentation but archival disappearance. When language shifts, oral traditions weaken, or ecological livelihoods are disrupted, knowledge loss can become rapid and uneven. A centralized archive may preserve fragments, but if it does not support local use and intergenerational transmission, it will do little to sustain community continuity.

5.4 Toto Knowledge and Borderland Vulnerability

The Toto community, concentrated in the north Bengal region, has long been recognized as especially vulnerable. Here the stakes of archiving are particularly high. Folklore, language, ritual, foodways, and local history require preservation strategies that are both sensitive and community-led. A post-custodial model is especially relevant because a small community can be easily over-documented by outsiders while remaining under-served in terms of actual cultural infrastructure.

6. Ethnomedicine, Ethnomycology, and Ecological Practice

Several studies from West Bengal and adjoining regions show that tribal communities maintain complex healthcare and ecological knowledge systems involving plants, fungi, and locally available materials (Roy et al., 2015; Sarkar, 2025). These practices are often transmitted orally and through apprenticeship-like learning. They are not simply “folk beliefs.” They are empirical knowledge systems shaped by local landscapes, generations of observation, and embodied familiarity with forest and field environments. Their loss would mean not only cultural erosion but the disappearance of local environmental intelligence. For that reason, indigenous knowledge archives in West Bengal should not be conceptualized merely as repositories of songs or photographs. They should be seen as infrastructures for preserving ecological memory, ritual authority, and community pedagogy.

7. Mukurtu, TK Labels, TKDL, and Omeka S: Comparative Reflections

7.1 Mukurtu as a Post-Custodial Tool

Mukurtu’s strength lies in its design philosophy. It was built to support indigenous communities who need more than standard digital collection management. It allows communities to define access protocols, represent multiple narratives, incorporate local metadata, and manage circulation according to cultural authority. Mukurtu documentation and the Local Contexts framework make clear that labels and notices can help specify who may access a record, how it should be attributed, and under what conditions it should be reused. ([Local Contexts – Grounding Indigenous Rights](#))

For West Bengal, this matters because many cultural materials are not meant for universal circulation. A sacred grove ritual, a clan-specific narrative, a medicinal preparation, or a gender-restricted ceremony cannot ethically be archived through a default public-access model. Mukurtu’s layered access would allow communities to decide what is public, what is restricted, and what remains locally held without digitization.

7.2 Traditional Knowledge Labels

Traditional Knowledge Labels are not legal substitutes for copyright. Their value lies elsewhere. They articulate community expectations, provenance, and responsibility in a digital environment. A label may indicate attribution, non-commercial use, secret or sacred status, seasonal restriction, clan restriction, or verification by the community. Local Contexts explains that these labels help establish Indigenous cultural authority and governance by adding contextual metadata, protocols, and permissions. ([Local Contexts – Grounding Indigenous Rights](#))

In the West Bengal setting, TK Labels could be transformative. A Santal audio recording of a Baha song might carry labels indicating community attribution, seasonal restriction, or non-commercial use. A medicinal plant entry contributed by elders could be marked as verified and community-restricted. Such labels would not solve all legal problems, but they would materially shift the ethical structure of the archive.

7.3 TKDL as Defensive Infrastructure

TKDL occupies a very different place. Official sources describe it as a representative database of Ayurvedic, Unani, Siddha, and Sowa Rigpa formulations, with full access available to patent offices under agreement. ([TKDL](#)) Its main purpose is defensive protection against wrongful patents. This is an important achievement in the realm of intellectual property. However, its architecture is state-centered, textual, and classificatory. It does not function as a community-governed archive of living indigenous knowledge.

In relation to West Bengal's tribal communities, TKDL is therefore useful as a reference point but not as a sufficient model. It shows how traditional knowledge can be documented and mobilized in legal contexts, yet it does not address oral transmission, sacred restriction, collective governance, or local benefit-sharing. Its logic is national rather than community-specific.

7.4 Omeka S and Institutional Publishing

Omeka S, by contrast, is a strong institutional platform for publishing digital collections and exhibits. It supports standards-based metadata, multi-site management, and interoperability. For universities or museums collaborating with communities, it can be useful. But without substantial customization, it lacks indigenous-specific protocol structures and does not natively support the ethical complexity that Mukurtu was built to address.

For that reason, Omeka S may be helpful for broad public-facing collaborations or institutional exhibitions in West Bengal, but it is less suitable as the core archival platform where community sovereignty and layered access are central. A hybrid ecology might be possible, with Mukurtu serving as the community-governed repository and Omeka S supporting selected public exhibits in collaboration with institutions.

8. Colonial Legacies and the Problem of Archival Representation in India

Any discussion of indigenous archives in West Bengal must reckon with colonial history. Colonial rule did not merely collect artifacts. It produced classificatory regimes. Tribes were enumerated, mapped, described, and often pathologized. Knowledge about forests, medicine, labor, and custom was gathered in ways that served administration. This legacy

did not disappear after independence. In many cases it was inherited by development bureaucracies, museums, and research institutions.

The result is a paradox. Indigenous communities may be extensively documented and yet remain archivally marginalized. Their knowledge exists in district reports, ethnographies, museum labels, theses, and biodiversity surveys, but they often lack authority over these representations. The archive contains them without belonging to them.

This matters for contemporary preservation in at least three ways. First, description can be violent. Old names, pejorative subject terms, or reductive categories can continue to shape how communities are viewed. Second, access can be exploitative. A publicly available ethnographic archive may expose sacred or sensitive content to misuse. Third, extraction can persist under digital conditions. A researcher with a recorder and a website can replicate older extraction models even without removing a physical object.

Post-custodial archiving is not a cure-all, but it directly addresses this historical problem by changing where authority sits. It insists that preservation without community governance is incomplete.

9. Why West Bengal Needs a Tailored Post-Custodial Framework

The global examples of Mukurtu and indigenous digital archives are important, but they cannot simply be imported unchanged. West Bengal requires a tailored framework for several reasons.

- First, the region is multilingual. Any viable archive would need to accommodate Bengali, English, and multiple indigenous languages such as Santali and Kurukh, with room for oral forms that may not be fully standardized in writing.
- Second, many communities face a digital divide. Connectivity, device access, and digital literacy vary widely across districts. A platform that assumes constant broadband access would be poorly suited to local realities.
- Third, the cultural protocols themselves differ. A one-size-fits-all protocol template would not work. Some communities may emphasize clan-based access, others age hierarchy, ritual timing, locality, or lineage-specific rights.
- Fourth, the legal setting in India remains underdeveloped with respect to community control over cultural data. Existing law is fragmented across intellectual property, biodiversity, forest rights, and heritage regulation. A West Bengal framework would therefore need to include policy advocacy and not rely on technology alone.
- Fifth, the archive must support living use. A purely documentary archive may interest researchers but do little for the community. Materials should be usable in local schools, cultural training, language revitalization, seasonal festivals, and intergenerational teaching.

10. A Proposed Post-Custodial Framework for West Bengal

The framework proposed here is built around five interdependent pillars.

10.1. Community Authority and Consent

Every archival initiative should begin with community governance, not with data collection. This means identifying local councils, elders, ritual specialists, women's groups, youth

representatives, and cultural practitioners who can shape the project from the start. Consent must be collective as well as individual where appropriate. Some knowledge may be widely shareable, some shareable only within the community, and some not archivable at all. Community advisory boards should therefore be established at the village or cluster level. These boards should decide appraisal priorities, access rules, metadata terms, language use, and modes of circulation. They should also have the authority to withdraw items or change their status over time.

10.2. Culturally Responsive Metadata

Metadata should not simply replicate institutional categories. Instead, it should include local names, self-identification, place-based meanings, seasonal associations, and customary protocols. A sacred grove entry, for instance, should not be described merely as “forest patch” or “religious site.” It should include community terminology, ritual significance, associated deities or spirits where sharable, ecological notes, restrictions, and oral narratives where appropriate.

This is one of the strongest arguments for adopting Mukurtu-like systems. Its structure allows for community records, layered metadata, and the coexistence of multiple narratives. In West Bengal, culturally responsive metadata could also become a tool of linguistic preservation by enabling indigenous-language descriptions alongside Bengali and English.

10.3. Layered Access and Protocol-Based Sharing

Not everything should be public. A principled archive distinguishes between open educational content, community-only materials, restricted ceremonial knowledge, and non-digitizable content. TK Labels and related notices offer a practical way to communicate such distinctions. ([Local Contexts](#))

In a West Bengal pilot, access levels could include:

- public educational items,
- registered community-member access,
- subgroup or clan access,
- seasonal access,
- elder or knowledge-holder access,
- fully restricted local storage without online publication.

This layered model is particularly important for ritual songs, medicinal preparations, sacred narratives, and festival documentation.

10.4. Distributed and Hybrid Infrastructure

Because digital inequality remains real, a West Bengal post-custodial archive should use hybrid infrastructure. This means combining local storage, mobile-friendly interfaces, offline access possibilities, and selective cloud backup. Community knowledge centers, schools, local libraries, or cultural hubs could serve as access points. University departments or state archives could provide technical support without taking ownership.

UNESCO’s cultural hub model in West Bengal already demonstrates that living heritage initiatives can be linked to training, livelihoods, and local transmission. ([UNESCO](#)) A post-

custodial archive could build on that logic by adding digital stewardship capacity and community metadata governance.

10.5. Benefit-Sharing, Training, and Long-Term Sustainability

An archive should not become a one-way pipeline from community to research. If recordings, photographs, ecological knowledge, or cultural documentation are used in exhibitions, publications, curricula, or public projects, communities must receive recognition and material benefit where appropriate. This includes paid roles for community archivists, training for youth, local control over educational reuse, and transparent decision-making over partnerships.

Training is central. Indigenous archivists, digital stewards, translators, and metadata contributors should be identified and supported from within the communities themselves. Without this, post-custodial language risks becoming symbolic while technical control remains external.

11 Applying the Framework: Community-Specific Possibilities

11.1 Santal Areas in Purulia, Bankura, Jhargram, and Birbhum

A pilot archive in Santal-majority or Santal-significant areas could begin with *Jaher Than* documentation, festival records, oral histories of land and migration, song repertoires, and agro-ecological knowledge. However, the emphasis should be on controlled documentation. Sacred protocols must determine what can be recorded and what must remain oral and local. Public-facing outputs might include educational materials on biodiversity and community conservation, while sensitive ritual recordings remain restricted.

11.2 Toto Community in North Bengal

For the Toto community, language and oral tradition preservation may be especially urgent. A small-scale community archive could prioritize storytelling, local history, ritual terminology, family memory, and ecological knowledge. Because the community is demographically vulnerable, strict governance over outsider access would be essential.

11.3 Birhor and Lodha Contexts

In work with Birhor or Lodha communities, the focus may include forest knowledge, mobility history, craft techniques, and oral narratives. Such archives should avoid turning communities into ethnographic spectacle. Instead, they should be built around what communities themselves identify as necessary for continuity and self-representation.

11.4 Oraon and Kurukh Traditions

Among Oraon communities, medicinal and ritual knowledge, songs, social memory, and language resources could be integrated into a layered archive that supports school-level cultural education and community gatherings. Because such knowledge often crosses regions, the archive may also require federated or inter-district collaboration.

12. Challenges

- The strongest objection to this model is practical: community-led archives require funding, technology, translation, facilitation, and time. This is true. But centralized custodial archives also require resources, and they often fail communities despite

long histories of funding. The issue is not whether resources are needed, but how they are allocated and who controls outcomes.

- A second challenge is legal ambiguity. India lacks a coherent framework for indigenous knowledge sovereignty comparable to the ethical vocabulary developed in Local Contexts or Native archival protocols. Existing intellectual property law is often ill-fitted to collective, ancient, or orally transmitted knowledge. This makes it difficult to secure enforceable control over reuse.
- A third challenge is internal complexity. Communities are not monolithic. Questions of gender, age, lineage, political leadership, and religious change may shape who is recognized as a legitimate knowledge holder. A post-custodial framework must therefore be participatory without assuming perfect consensus.
- A fourth challenge is the risk of digital essentialism. Not all preservation needs digitization. Some knowledge should remain embodied, local, and situational. A good post-custodial archive respects refusal. It must include the right not to digitize.
- A fifth challenge is sustainability. Too many heritage projects begin with excitement and end with abandoned websites, expired grants, or inaccessible servers. This is why long-term training and institutional partnerships matter. Universities, archives, NGOs, and government bodies can play a role, but only if they accept a supporting rather than owning position.

13. Policy Recommendations

Several policy-level interventions would strengthen the feasibility of post-custodial archives in West Bengal.

- First, the state should recognize community-centered digital heritage preservation as part of tribal development and cultural policy, not merely as an academic issue.
- Second, archives, museums, and universities in West Bengal should adopt consultation protocols for indigenous materials, drawing inspiration from international indigenous archival standards while adapting them locally.
- Third, pilot funding should be created for community-controlled archival projects in selected districts, with mandatory community governance and transparent benefit-sharing.
- Fourth, state and national institutions should support multilingual digital infrastructure, including indigenous-language metadata and interfaces.
- Fifth, legal reform is needed to address collective cultural rights in archival and digital contexts. Even if a fully new law is not immediately possible, policy guidelines can begin to recognize community authority, restricted access, and obligations of attribution and consent.
- Sixth, collaboration with established platforms and networks should be pursued carefully. Mukurtu and Local Contexts offer conceptual and technical lessons, while India's experience with TKDL offers lessons in scale and classification. A West Bengal framework should learn from both without simply copying either.

14. Conclusion

The archive has too often been imagined as a place where institutions rescue culture from loss. In indigenous contexts, that story is incomplete and frequently misleading. Communities have long preserved their own knowledge through ritual, memory, land practice, and intergenerational teaching. The problem is not that they lack archives. The problem is that formal archival systems have often failed to recognize those living archives on their own terms. For West Bengal's indigenous communities, the stakes are especially high. Sacred groves, oral traditions, medicinal knowledge, festivals, songs, language practices, ecological observation, and community memory are all under pressure from modernization, displacement, cultural assimilation, and extractive forms of representation. At the same time, digital tools now make new forms of preservation possible. The question is whether those tools will repeat the logic of extraction or support a different future. Post-custodial archiving offers one of the most promising answers. By shifting emphasis from institutional possession to community stewardship, it creates a more ethical basis for preserving indigenous knowledge. Mukurtu, TK Labels, and related global initiatives show that archives can be designed around protocol, sovereignty, and layered access. India's TKDL, meanwhile, demonstrates the power of digital infrastructure in protecting traditional knowledge, though it remains limited as a community-centered model. ([TKDL](#)) The framework proposed in this paper argues that West Bengal needs a tailored model grounded in local realities: multilingual metadata, hybrid infrastructure, community authority, benefit-sharing, and the right to refuse digitization where necessary. Such a model would not treat indigenous knowledge as raw material for institutional collection. It would treat it as a living, governed, relational inheritance.

The broader significance of this argument extends beyond West Bengal. In many postcolonial societies, archives still carry the afterlife of colonial extraction. Building post-custodial systems is therefore not only a matter of better preservation. It is part of the unfinished work of archival justice. When communities retain authority over their own stories, the archive ceases to be a locked room and becomes something closer to what it should have been all along: a shared, ethical space of memory, continuity, and future-making.

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