

Reading Without Hearing: AI, Oral Traditions, and the Representation of Haryanvi Folk Culture

Niketa Malik

Research Scholar

Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidyalaya

ABSTRACT

With the increasing use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in language processing and interpretation, questions arise regarding its ability to interpret and represent the cultural meanings embedded in folk traditions. As important forms of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), folk songs preserve collective memory, social values, cultural practices, and community identities through oral transmission. While AI can translate, summarise, and interpret texts efficiently, its ability to understand culturally situated knowledge remains underexplored, particularly in the context of regional Indian folk cultures. This study investigates how AI interprets Haryanvi folk songs and analyses the extent to which AI-generated interpretations represent the cultural meanings in the process. Hence, the study suggests that AI should be seen as a complementary tool for documenting and making folk traditions accessible, rather than a complete substitute for culturally informed interpretation. To improve the quality and accuracy of AI-generated cultural interpretations, the paper recommends the development of culturally enriched datasets and specialised cultural corpora capable of representing local traditions and context-specific knowledge more effectively.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage, Haryanvi Folk Songs, Cultural Interpretation, Artificial Intelligence, Oral Tradition, Folklore Studies.

INTRODUCTION

Folk songs preserve Intangible Cultural Heritage through oral transmission, capturing collective memory, social values, and lived experiences. Unlike written records, they transmit cultural knowledge across generations from ordinary people's perspectives. Walter J. Ong emphasises that oral traditions are dynamic cultural systems, not merely spoken texts, where knowledge emerges through performance, repetition, and communal participation. In Haryana, folk songs preserve traditions related to marriage, kinship, festivals, spirituality, and women's experiences (Singh & Attri; Suchitra et al.).

As Artificial Intelligence becomes prevalent in cultural documentation, questions arise regarding its capacity to represent culturally situated knowledge. Large Language Models generate interpretations efficiently but do not understand meaning as communities do. Rather than possessing lived experience or cultural consciousness, LLMs recognise statistical relationships within textual datasets. Consequently, AI-generated interpretations may successfully reconstruct documented cultural knowledge while providing limited insight into meanings arising through collective memory, oral performance, ritual participation, and shared social experience (Hall; Assmann).

Research on AI and Intangible Cultural Heritage remains limited. Li et al. argue that AI captures literal meanings while encountering difficulties with culturally specific associations and context-dependent interpretation. This study addresses a gap by examining Haryanvi folk songs—largely absent from current discussions—to investigate both the opportunities and limitations of AI-assisted cultural interpretation. The paper demonstrates that meaningful cultural representation extends beyond linguistic explanation to include performance, collective memory, and lived experience.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study examines how Google's Gemini represents cultural meanings in Haryanvi folk songs. Six songs were purposively selected from published folklore collections to represent diverse dimensions of cultural heritage: marriage rituals, seasonal festivals, women's lived experiences, kinship relations, spirituality, and nature worship (Kumar, Singh & Attri; Suchitra et al.).

Each song was presented to Gemini using a consistent prompt:

"Interpret the following Haryanvi folk song. Explain its literal meaning, cultural significance, symbolic expressions, and social context. Identify rituals, customs, emotions, or traditional practices represented."

The prompt was repeated across independent chat sessions to ensure consistency. Minor wording variations occurred, but overall interpretations and thematic emphases remained stable. AI-generated responses were documented verbatim and compared with interpretations from published folklore scholarship, ethnographic studies, and the researcher's cultural familiarity as a native Haryanvi speaker.

Comparative analysis focused on four dimensions:

1. Literal Meaning: Accurate interpretation of lyrical content
2. Cultural Context: Recognition of relevant customs, rituals, and social institutions
3. Embedded Cultural Meaning: Reflection of symbolic meanings, collective memory, and culturally shared knowledge
4. Interpretive Limitations: Aspects remaining absent, simplified, or underrepresented

Limitations: The study analyses one AI model; findings do not generalise to all LLMs. Folk traditions are dynamic and interpreted differently across communities. Future research should incorporate community interviews and multiple AI systems.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Stuart Hall's concept of representation frames this analysis. Meaning is produced through culturally shared systems of interpretation shaped by social contexts and shared experiences, not residing inherently in language alone. Since folk songs contain culturally specific symbols, practices, and social relationships, Hall's framework examines how AI interprets and communicates their meanings.

Jan Assmann's cultural memory concept is equally important. Haryanvi folk songs function as repositories of cultural memory—collective knowledge, values, and traditions preserved and transmitted across generations through oral tradition. This framework evaluates whether AI-generated interpretations adequately represent these embedded memories.

Together, these theories enable the investigation of what AI understands in folk songs versus what aspects of cultural representation and memory remain underrepresented.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Teej and Sawan Song

"पानी पानी बूंदियां मियाँ बरसता हे जी, सखी सहेली मां मेरी झूलती जी, हमने झूलण का हे मां मेरी चाव जी।"

(Raindrops are gently falling all around, my friends are swinging together, and I too long to join them on the swings.) (Singh 38)

Gemini contextualises this song within Haryali Teej, explaining raindrops as monsoon arrival symbolism and swings as representing joy and fertility. The response identifies Teej as "a socially sanctioned space where women could gather away from the watchful eyes of male elders" and notes that the festival creates opportunities for women to express emotions suppressed by everyday social conventions. Gemini further interprets chaav as innocent excitement and emphasises sakhi-saheli (female companionship) as central to Haryanvi social life.

However, Singh and Attri argue that Haryanvi folk songs function as spaces where women articulate aspirations, negotiate social expectations, and reinforce collective identity. While Gemini recognises Teej as a women-centred festival, it emphasises the festival itself rather than explaining how collective performance enables women to construct shared identities and express experiences less visible in daily life. The song's cultural significance lies not only in celebrating Teej but in the social relationships continually reinforced through performance.

Jakri Song (Muklava Theme)

"ओ हो चाह मुकलावे के, मैं दुस्सर लेके जाऊँ री चाह मुकलावे के।"

(See my enthusiasm for Muklava; I depart with a load of gifts, see my enthusiasm for Muklava.) (Kumar 4)

Gemini interprets Jakri within the traditional Haryanvi marriage system, recognising Muklava as the ceremony marking a bride's formal beginning of married life in her husband's household. The response notes the dussar (ceremonial shawl) as symbolising dignity, maturity, and readiness for a new life stage. Gemini further describes how such folk songs are performed by groups of women, allowing the bride to express excitement, anticipation, and romantic longing within a culturally accepted setting.

Yet the song reflects a profound rite of passage. The ceremony marks incorporation into a new household and social identity, making it one of the most significant life transitions. Singh and Attri emphasise that Haryanvi women's folk songs preserve emotional realities of marriage, separation, and changing familial relationships. They function as narratives of lived experience rather than merely describing social customs. While Gemini identifies ritual significance and interprets the dussar symbolically, it gives greater attention to the ceremony itself than to the broader transformation of identity this transition represents.

Woman Confronting Husband (Ragni)

"भरया भरया दामण में तो बाप के तै ल्याई, वो भी बेच खाग्या मेरे बाप का जमाई।"

(I brought a richly embroidered trousseau from my father's home, yet even that was sold away by my father's son-in-law.) (Singh 37)

Gemini recognises the daaman as a significant trousseau component representing the father's affection, honour, and economic investment. The response identifies "मेरे बाप का जमाई" ("my father's son-in-law") as a deliberate rhetorical strategy distancing the woman from her husband and questioning his moral responsibility. Gemini situates the song within the Ragni tradition, where satire and folk performance historically provided women with socially acceptable mediums for expressing resentment and critiquing patriarchal injustice. The response notes this as "a powerful linguistic device."

However, Singh and Attri situate such songs within a broader tradition of women's social commentary. Rather than presenting suffering as private experience, the song transforms domestic injustice into public critique through irony and satire. Performed collectively, these songs encouraged audiences to reflect on economic exploitation, gender relations, and moral responsibility. While Gemini explains the symbolism effectively, the broader social function as communal criticism remains less fully developed.

Saas-Nanad-Devar Song (Khodia)

"सासू तो बीरा चूले की आग, ननद भादों की बिजली। सौरा तो बीरा काला सा नाग, देवर सांप सम्पोलिया।"

(My mother-in-law is like fire from the stove, my sister-in-law is like monsoon lightning, my father-in-law is like a black snake, my brother-in-law is like a little snake.) (Suchitra 11224)

Gemini identifies the song as belonging to Gaali, Sithne, and Khodia traditions, where satire and exaggeration serve as accepted emotional expression forms. The response carefully explains each metaphor: the mother-in-law's association with the chulha's ever-burning fire, the sister-in-law with monsoon lightning unpredictability, the father-in-law with a black cobra's silent authority, and the younger brother-in-law with a mischievous snake. Gemini recognises that such songs were performed during Khodia, "a women-only gathering" where humour created "a safe vent for subversion."

Yet the song's significance lies equally in strategic humour usage. Exaggerated comparisons are not intended to demonise family members but provide women with a culturally accepted language for expressing domestic tensions without confrontation. Within Khodia performances, laughter itself becomes a mechanism for negotiating hierarchy, strengthening solidarity, and easing the emotional pressures of married life. Suchitra et al. emphasise how folk songs preserve collective values through symbolic expression and oral performance, with performances strengthening communal solidarity by transforming shared domestic experiences into collective humour. While Gemini explains the metaphors individually, it does not fully articulate this communal solidifying function.

Yamuna Song

"जमना की देखी राही, मैं भूल गई बहन अर भाई। जमना माई तेरा जल अमृत पानी।"

(When I saw the path leading to Mother Yamuna, I forgot my sisters and brothers. O Mother Yamuna, your water is like the nectar of immortality.) (Suchitra 11225)

Gemini recognises devotional intensity by interpreting this as a traditional Yamuna Geet celebrating the Yamuna as Jamna Mai, a maternal deity revered throughout North India. The response extends beyond literal meaning to include pilgrimage traditions, ritual bathing (snan), and women's collective devotional singing while travelling to the river. Gemini interprets "मैं भूल गई बहन अर भाई" as a metaphor for spiritual transcendence and understands amrit as symbolising divine grace, purification, and spiritual renewal. The response describes the Yamuna as "a living, breathing deity, mother, and spiritual entity."

However, Suchitra et al. emphasise the communal experience of devotion sustained through collective performance. Gemini effectively recognises religious symbolism, yet the scholarship places greater emphasis on how communal devotional practice itself sustains these traditions across generations—an aspect less explicit in the AI-generated interpretation.

Peepal Tree Couplet

"तेरी डाली सीज के सदा पावें हम सुख, पीपल सीज्या हरि मिले, एक पंथ दो काज।"

(By watering your branches, may we always find happiness; by watering the Peepal tree, one attains the Divine, accomplishing two purposes through a single act.) (Suchitra 11224)

Gemini recognises the Peepal as a sacred Vedic symbol, identifying it as an abode of Lord Vishnu (Hari) and explaining the ritual of seenjna (water offering) as a devotional practice observed throughout rural Haryana. The response interprets the idiom "एक पंथ दो काज" as a philosophy uniting spiritual merit with practical benefit, suggesting that watering the tree fulfils both religious obligation and ecological responsibility. Gemini positions the Peepal within village social geography, describing its association with the chaupal and its role as a centre for worship and daily social life. The response characterises it as "a beautiful blend of the spiritual and the material."

However, the couplet's significance extends beyond religious symbolism. It presents environmental care as integral to everyday ethical life. Spiritual devotion becomes inseparable from ecological responsibility, illustrating how traditional communities embedded conservation practices within religious observance. This fusion of environmental wisdom and ritual practice preserved sacred trees across generations. Suchitra et al. observe that Haryanvi folk traditions preserve environmental values by embedding them within everyday cultural and religious practices, with such beliefs functioning as mechanisms of community-based environmental stewardship. The preservation of nature is sustained through inherited cultural practice as much as through religious symbolism—a dimension less developed in the AI interpretation.

DISCUSSION

Gemini demonstrates considerable ability in interpreting culturally embedded texts beyond literal meanings. Across all songs, the AI identified explicit cultural references—marriage customs, seasonal festivals, kinship structures, devotional traditions, environmental beliefs, and symbolic imagery—and contextualised them within broader social and historical practices. These findings suggest contemporary generative AI possesses significant potential for facilitating access to regional cultural knowledge and supporting documentation and dissemination of intangible cultural heritage.

However, a consistent pattern emerges: Gemini places greater emphasis on describing customs than explaining the social functions these traditions perform within community life. The Teej song illustrates how seasonal festivals cultivate female solidarity; Jakri reflects marriage as a transformative rite of passage; the Ragni converts individual suffering into public social criticism; the Khodia song employs humour for negotiating domestic relationships; the Yamuna song expresses devotion through shared pilgrimage; and the Peepal couplet integrates ecological responsibility with everyday practice. These dimensions emerge not from lyrical content alone but from continued performance within specific cultural contexts.

This corresponds with Stuart Hall's understanding of representation: meaning is produced through culturally shared interpretation systems rather than residing inherently in language. Gemini demonstrates remarkable ability in retrieving and organising documented cultural information, yet meanings embedded in oral traditions are continually shaped through social interaction, performance, and collective participation. Jan Assmann's cultural memory concept reinforces this: while AI can describe many traditions, it cannot participate in the cultural processes through which such memories are sustained, renewed, and experienced.

The principal limitation of contemporary generative AI is not the absence of cultural knowledge but a difference in cultural understanding. Gemini effectively synthesises information documented in textual sources and publicly available knowledge. It performs particularly well in interpreting extensively recorded rituals, symbols, religious beliefs, and historical customs. By contrast, meanings arising through embodied participation, interpersonal relationships, shared humour, emotional memory, or community performance remain difficult to represent because they depend upon lived experience rather than textual information alone.

The Documented/Experiential Knowledge Distinction

This study proposes a conceptual distinction between documented cultural knowledge—preserved in texts, scholarship, and historical records, effectively retrievable and synthesised by AI—and experiential cultural knowledge—arising through oral performance, collective memory, and community participation, dependent on lived engagement rather than textual information alone. This distinction provides a framework for understanding AI's role in heritage preservation: AI functions optimally with documented knowledge while remaining limited for experiential knowledge.

Heritage Ethics and Community Authority

These findings raise important questions regarding authority and consent in cultural interpretation. UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage conventions emphasise that safeguarding traditions requires not only documentation but also community-informed consent and continued agency. Who decides which meanings are preserved or simplified in AI-generated interpretations? Future AI-assisted heritage projects should incorporate community governance structures, transparent documentation of interpretive choices, and benefit-sharing arrangements ensuring communities maintain authority over their own traditions.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

Rather than replacing folklore scholars and community practitioners, AI functions most effectively as a complementary resource, improving accessibility through translation, explanation, and

contextualization. Meaningful cultural interpretation continues depending upon community-preserved knowledge. Integrating AI with ethnographic research, folklore scholarship, and community participation offers more balanced digital heritage preservation than automated interpretation alone.

Future AI systems designed for regional cultural traditions should move beyond multilingual datasets to incorporate: (1) culturally annotated folklore corpora with metadata marking ritual significance and performative variations; (2) contextual documentation of rituals and performances with structured annotations by community practitioners; (3) oral histories and audio-visual recordings capturing performance contexts; and (4) collaborative contributions from tradition bearers with clear governance structures and benefit-sharing agreements. A pilot project might involve creating a Haryanvi folk songs dataset including: song transcriptions in Haryanvi script and Roman transliteration, performance audio/video with contextual metadata (season, occasion, performer background, audience composition), structured annotations by community practitioners, scholarly commentary linking songs to published folklore studies, and explicit usage terms negotiated with community contributors.

CONCLUSION

Haryanvi folk songs constitute important Intangible Cultural Heritage components, preserving cultural memory, social values, rituals, and lived experiences through oral tradition. This analysis of six songs demonstrates that Gemini successfully identifies themes, emotions, metaphors, and explicit cultural references, accurately explaining marriage customs, kinship structures, seasonal celebrations, spiritual beliefs, and symbolic expressions. These findings suggest AI possesses considerable potential in making folk traditions more accessible.

Simultaneously, the study reveals limitations. While AI effectively interprets surface meanings and cultural references, it underrepresents deeper layers connected to collective memory, ritual participation, lived experience, and performative traditions. Cultural knowledge acquired through community participation cannot always be fully conveyed through linguistic interpretation alone. AI-generated explanations may capture what a song says without completely representing what the song means within its cultural context.

Therefore, AI should function as a supplementary tool for preservation, documentation, and dissemination of folk traditions, not a substitute for culturally informed interpretation. Developing culturally enriched datasets and specialised cultural corpora may improve AI's ability to recognise context-specific knowledge. As digital technologies shape Intangible Cultural Heritage preservation, collaboration between technology and cultural expertise remains essential for meaningful cultural representation.

WORKS CITED

- Assmann, Jan. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge UP, 2011.
- Hall, Stuart. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Sage Publications, 1997.
- Kumar, Devender. "Jakari-Life Songs of Haryanvi Women." Unpublished manuscript, Academia.edu, 2024, www.academia.edu/29809958/Jakari_Life_Songs_of_Haryanvi_Women_docx.

- Li, Gaoning, Hao Chen, Yan Lu, and Yidan Huang. "A Study on Semantic Default of Culture-Loaded Words in Intangible Cultural Heritage Folk Songs Empowered by AI." *Journal of Contemporary Educational Research*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2026.
- Singh, Bhawna, and Shalini Attri. "Folk Songs: Reviving the Voices of Haryanvi Women." *Literary Herald: An International Refereed/Peer-reviewed English e-Journal*, vol. 8, no. 5, 2023, pp. 32-38.
- Suchitra, et al. "Echoes of Tradition: Exploring the Cultural Fabric of Haryana through Folk Songs." *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2024, pp. 11221-11226. DOI: 10.53555/kuey.v30i4.9925.
- UNESCO. *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. UNESCO, 2003.
- Google. Gemini. Google, <https://gemini.google.com>. Accessed 10 June 2026.