Enduring Cultures – A Socio Cultural Toolkit

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Abstract – **In the mad rush of modernization and the blind aping of Western manners, the East Indians (Roman Catholic ethnic group from the west coast of India) are slowly but steadily losing count of some of their most cherished customs and conventions, and are at the risk of being lost forever. 'Enduring Cultures' is an approach to cultural heritage preservation and protection of indigenous knowledge with an emphasis on local community participation and collaboration via social media. This paper presents a design recommendation of a work-in-progress system that aims at engaging the community together while creating a platform for generating and broadcasting content that is central to the community's cultural identity.**

Keywords – social tools; community; cultural computing; preservation; collaborative; culture; web; mobile; user generated content; East Indians; Mumbai.

I. INTRODUCTION - THE EAST INDIANS AND THEIR CULTURE

The East Indians are indigenous to the west Konkan coast of India and owe their nomenclature not to natural growth but to a change of religion. Under the Portuguese rule in the 16th century, several villages were evangelised and many accepted the Catholic faith [1].

Much later, by the adoption of the name `East Indian' they wanted to impress upon the British Government of Bombay that they were the earliest Roman Catholic subjects under the British Crown in this part of India [2].

This conversion was the main foundation of this Marathi Christian community making it a culturally rich amalgamation of pre-christian traditions and adaptations from Christianity. Their manners, customs and social mores rendered them a community absolutely apart from all the other Indian communities and have unique daily practices ingrained in their religion, villages, language, dressing, cuisine, music, matchmaking and their occupation.

Figure 1 shows a series of photographs from the community depicting worship, costume, family and living.

Figure 1. The East Indians of Mumbai, India.

II. OPPORTUNITIES AND NEED GAPS

Although cultures themselves are dynamic and evolving, they are fragile when faced with political, social and economic changes [3]. For example, large-scale migration patterns of communities moving out from rural into urban areas have resulted in many social practices being eroded and lost.

For generations, oral tradition kept the elaborate social mores and traditional practices of the East Indians alive. With modernisation, communities are now faced with difficulties in maintaining their own culture and encouraging the newer generations to recognise their own cultural heritage as being worthy of preserving and passing on to future generations.

Today, as their coastal villages get increasingly urbanised, the small community is struggling to preserve their oral traditions in religion, matchmaking, dressing, cuisine, music and other unique cultural identities that rendered them a community in the first place.

Need gaps are critical in the face of information sourcing, dilution of cultural roots due to migration and

fragmentation of the community leading to loss in collective identity.

Figure 2. Home page of the East Indian Community website
(www.east-indians.com)

III. ISSUES WITH CURRENT INITIATIVES

Currently there are very few social media initiatives available for culture preservation or to shape and impart cultural practices. At best, only traditional portals like Facebook and Youtube to upload and share information amongst community members are in use. Some initiatives have been taken by the East Indian Association to create an online system for social interaction and general community awareness [4]. *Figure 2* is a screenshot of the home page of the East Indian Community system.

Most East Indians belong to the middle of the pyramid economic group. They generally lack the resources or the knowledge to access and participate in such portals. The most familiar mode of communication is the mobile phone (that are usually feature phones or entry level smart phones), which is primarily used for voice calls or SMS. Being in close vicinity to more urban localities, the community is also equipped with Internet facilities.

Despite the availability of infrastructure, there is still a lack of participation from the majority of the community due to the preference of in-person communication and lack of digital media devices that can address the needs of the community.

There is also another section of the younger generation of the community, which, under the influence of education and modernisation, is now adapting popular media. The varied technological adoptions within the community and the generation gaps are the critical reasons for the obliteration of cultural identity.

IV. DESIGN FOR DIALOGUE

Culture preservation is presently dominated by the documentation of tangible forms of culture. 'Enduring Cultures' addresses more than material preservation and incorporates the vital elements of everyday experiences in living culture.

Using traditional means of communication and technology readily available to the villages belonging to the middle of the pyramid, the concept aims at creating a multi-local society bridging the gap between the local villages and the migrants to the much modern localities. The concept also aims at creating tangibility on the web so as to reach to a wider global audience.

It allows indigenous people take the lead in data collection as well as utilization by choosing what they perceive as important, wish to preserve and pass on.

Figure 3 provides an overview of the concept model. In this model, the main goal is to first encourage the contribution of community information by users in various forms and formats. Information contributed are tagged, organized and stored in a culture repository that support the key functions for the community to *learn, pass on* and *sustain* themselves. The model's second thrust is to engender community interaction through co-creation and collaboration.

V. DETAILS OF THE SYSTEM

The idea proposed is that of a web application that extends onto mobiles, desktops and public displays
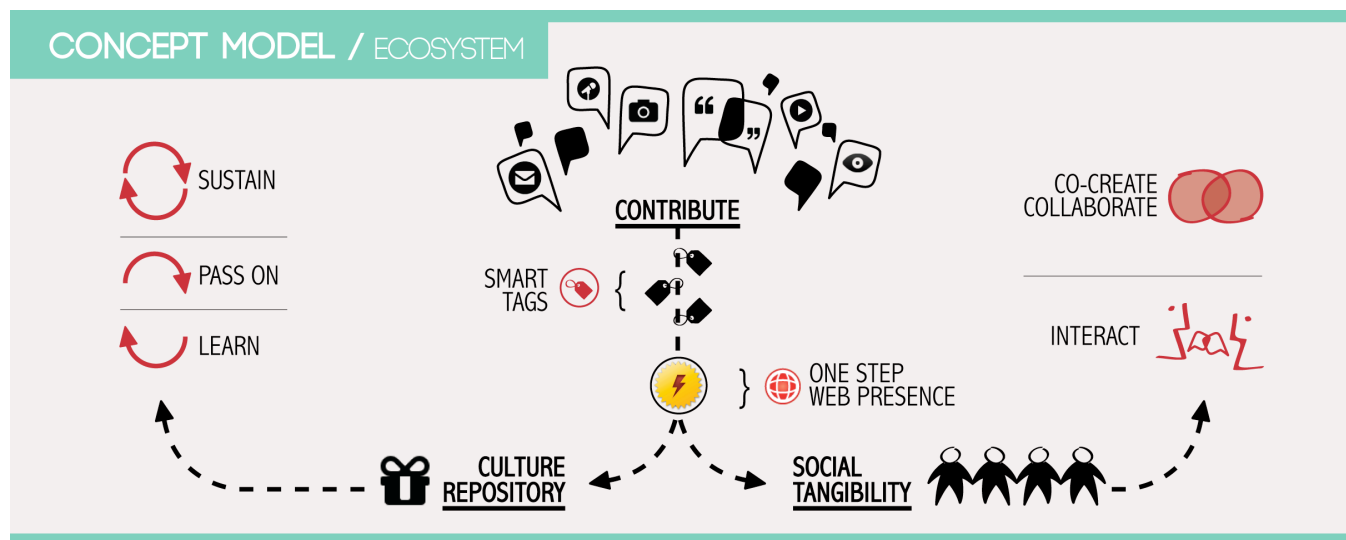

Figure 3. Concept Model

creating a self-authored and sustaining culture repository that allows users to capture, collaborate and co-create.

The system consists of four distinct segments that work together to give a holistic experience to the users.

A. Contribution of Content

Users may upload any content they consider unique to their cultural identity. For this purpose, users may use any medium most preferred by them like voice, text, video, photo, online link, and others.

B. Tagging of Uploaded Content

Any content contributed by a user undergoes a process of smart tagging so as to identify and distinguish the key characteristics of the content. Moreover, users may manually input additional tags to their content to facilitate data aggregation. These user-generated tags make the system more robust and flexible.

C. Self Organisation of Data

The next step is that of self-organisation of tagged content into media rich (audio, video, stills and text) sets called 'Frames' of common topics. Dynamic organisation of data helps users navigate through the culture repository more effectively thus allowing exploration and discovery of new information.

D. Sharing Consolidated 'Frames'

Users may interact with this self-authored culture repository by browsing, sharing, printing or posting individual sets of related topics while gaining and sharing culture rich information. *Figure 4* shows the use of the bulletin board concept for organizing information for viewing, browsing and interacting. The display changes as new information is contributed and as more hits to popular information artifacts are accumulated.

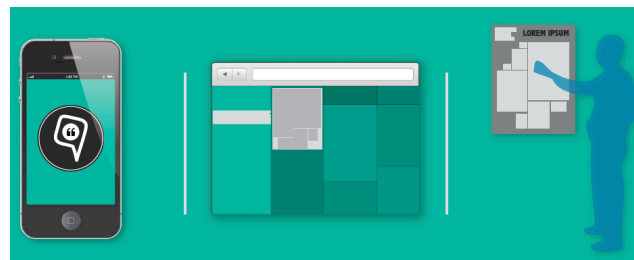Figure 4.   An Illustration of Data Contribution and Consolidation

Figure 5.   Three components – Mobile, Web and Public Display

The above-mentioned functions take place over an ecosystem comprising of three components described as follows (see *Figure 5*):

A. Mobile and Desktop

- A mobile application (which works as a layer on the in-built applications) and a desktop widget (with offline support) for tagging and uploading content on the go. They are essentially used for reporting anything happening in the community that will be of interest to or considered worth noticing by the other members of the community.

B. Web Interface

- A web repository for viewing and using the consolidated content. With this interface the users may:

- Receive SMS notifications about happening in and around their locality.

- View a live map of tags and uploads and identify cultural hotspots based on the nature of the content being uploaded by the members of the community of a particular neighbourhood.

- Promote and collaborate on upcoming events, broadcast announcements and raise concerns.

- Create 'tag shortcuts' for the particular sets or 'Frames'. This way when the user chooses to upload new content, they can quickly use the shortcut to automatically add the tags to the content.

C. Public Display

- This is envisaged to be a touch screen interface with interactive support through SMS facility to be put up at community centres. The public display targets users without the necessary resources to access content on the web and acts as a trigger for in-person interaction and an evidence of their varied cultural identities.

In addition to display of information the interactive screen can also be wirelessly connected for printing the content that the system generates using individual contributions of the members of the community. Users may alternatively choose to receive a link to the content of interest via SMS or email for future use.
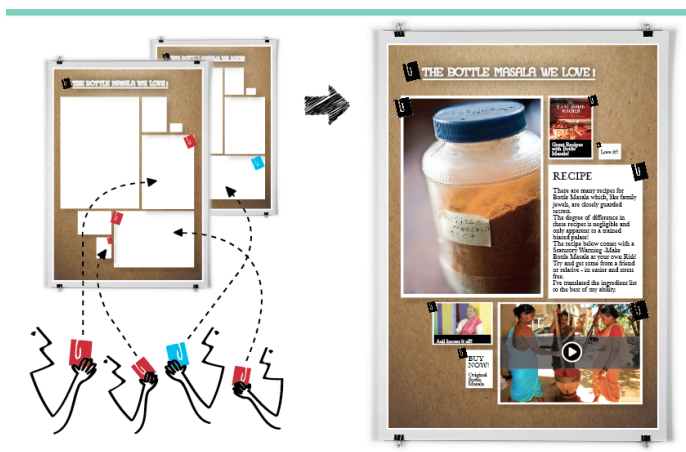
Moreover, the screen may also be transformed into one large monitor for viewing movies, live events and videos of community interest during community meetings, social gatherings or cultural events.

VI. TAGGING PROTOCOL FOR DATA ORGANISATION

To allow seamless data aggregation and retrieval, the tagging system has been defined using the following tag types:

A. Category - Pre-defined tag sets of cultural identities. Allow broad categorisation of content while placing in a Frame.

B. Keyphrase - A phrase describing the contribution. Smart words within the phrase act as the primary tag during retrieval.

C. Variable - Secondary tags that boost content aggregation. Multiple variables foster meaningful predictions while displaying content.

By allowing certain pre-defined categories and certain user-generated variables, the system attempts to create a balance, giving the users adequate amount of freedom to share their thoughts and support for assuring their content falls in the right set or Frame. The system uses these tags to dynamically organize data by combining, rearranging and replicating uploaded content into various Frames and exhibit the same as per the demand of the user.

VII. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

The proposed idea defines a standard protocol for contribution of content that can be most easily adopted by majority of the users, taking into consideration the varied levels of technological know-how amongst the users. The system also allows for seamless user-content interaction and viewing of the user generated content in different contexts (eg. view according to time, media, locality, tags or other variables).

While the platform provides assistance in observing, collecting, recording, and using data, it gives the members of the community freedom to choose and select the information, expressions and rituals that they perceive as important. This in-turn promotes a true sense of belonging while encouraging the people to recognise the significance of their own cultural heritage.

This social application is accessible to the masses, yet functional enough to address the social needs of communities that are at risk of quickly disappearing.

In order to further refine the concept, high fidelity user interfaces were designed and detailed for the various components of the system keeping in mind the varied levels of technical know-how amongst the users of the system (see *Figure 6*).

A focus group session with six participants from the community aged 35-50 years conducted in the contextual environment on this aspect of the work suggests that the system encourages the users to notice their surroundings from a culture preservation point of view. People were more conscious of aspects of their daily life pertaining to

their culture, which otherwise go unnoticed. Few users requested to see a list of tags and keywords used by others so as to trigger imagination while uploading new content. Variable tags were used as means of providing additional information about the content as opposed to describing the content. Users were also interested in viewing their contribution placed in different Frames with different interpretations.

We are currently developing a prototype of the system. As part of user studies and follow on work, we will carry out a series of iterations and refinements to gauge the usability and user interactions of the system in order to evolve the system into a highly intuitive system to serve the multi-local yet traditional community.

Figure 6. Interface design of the system - Frame

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