

## Life on the road: The fading oral tradition of *Behrupiyas*

By Sonia Chopra

Their lives move on roads, they go wherever work is available, set up their hamlets, and live. They are not homeless, but they have no permanent address. Staging plays and performances in villages, they take on various roles to entertain and tell stories. This impressionist community, known as *Behrupiyas*, are practitioners of an age-old ancestral art of impersonating and storytelling. This rich art form, once commonly practiced in rural hinterlands of India, is slowly dying, and its practitioners are failing to receive their much-deserved recognition.

Emotions are at the heart of these acts, and contemporary issues make the soul of the wit and humor of these local artists who pack the content of their performances with powerful dialects and sometimes puns.



### Reviving the traditional art

In order to provide a platform to these artists and also highlight their struggles, community radio Alfaz-e-Mewat FM 107.8 in partnership with Drishti (an NGO based in Ahmedabad, Gujarat) launched a new radio series titled "*Ghar Ghar Ghumati Zindagi*" that is focused on the *Behrupiya* community in district Nuh, Haryana. The series talks about the rich cultural history, art, and local folklore of the tribal nomads, and also highlights their challenges and needs. According to a Behrupiya community member from village Pinangwa, Nuh, "We migrated from Rajasthan in search of livelihoods. Our ancestral profession is performing arts; Behrupiyas used to perform plays, sing songs in emperor's courts. We do not know any other skill. It has been over fifteen years now that we are in Nuh. There has been a change in people's perspectives toward us. People shun us and treat us like beggars."

## Challenges galore

While the radio series tries to capture the voices and showcase their acts, listeners also get to understand the challenges faced by this community. Some of the Behrupiya families have their Aadhar identity cards (citizen recognition unique id) and voter ID cards, but they do not avail benefits under government programs, including public distribution system, integrated child development services, etc. Their children either do not attend school or they drop out very early, leading them into rag picking.

Their identity crisis results in their negligible participation in local governance, even though they have been living for years together in the region. "People do not treat us a part of their communities. We stay separated from the village community; the art form is now on a decline with most of us living in poverty," shared a Behrupiya community member who often dresses as a police officer, performing a satirical act woven around the disparities in society. He adds, "In this digital era surrounded by online digital devices, we are failing to attract the interest of society in local art."

Sohrab, the radio presenter at Alfaz-e-Mewat, shared his experience of working with the Behrupiya community, saying that Behrupiyas do not feel a part of the society; they no longer enjoy the same patronage as in the past.

While these performers in villages live in deplorable conditions, the same art forms in a repackaged version are gaining immense traction in urban settings.

When members of the Behrupiya community were approached to share their stories on radio, they said they would be happy to share as much as they can if this could help revive their art. "Art is like worship to us, it is our being," said a Behrupiya from village Azadpur, Nuh.

The Alfaz-e-Mewat team feels committed to helping to revive the culture of performing arts in the villages.

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