

From Erasure to Documentation: Authority Control Data for Indian Artists and Artisans

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Abstract

India's dominant caste groups have historically governed how art and artists are documented publicly in authoritative texts. As this issue proliferates in digital praxis, information about most of the country's artists and artisans from lowered castes is undocumented or erased. Since Wikipedia and Wikimedia projects allow only conventional citations, adding marginalised artists' data into authority control databases is an interim solution until the caste system is entirely abolished. Collaborating with the Getty Research Institute, I created nearly 700 artists' Union List of Artist Names (ULAN) records. Over 20,000 more new records are underway.

Keywords: artist, artisan, authority data, ulan, odisha, glam, getty

Introduction

Acquiring comprehensive biographical information regarding notable artists and artisans from India presents a challenge due to historical factors such as the enduring caste system and inadequate post-colonial public infrastructure. This scarcity complicates the identification of authoritative sources for citation purposes.

1 Impact of Caste-Based Socioeconomic Division on Artists

India's socioeconomic stratification, the caste system, categorises people into four *varnas* (divisions) by birth: *brahmin*, *kshatriya*, *vaishya*, and *shudra* (Chinnaswamy, 2023), collectively known as *savarna* or those born under a *varna*. Individuals in the first three *varnas* have historically been land-owning groups with other socioeconomic privileges. In contrast, those associated with the *shudra varna* commonly lack land ownership (Chinnaswamy, 2023). Numerous *jatis* (castes) and subcastes further delineate occupations within the four-*varna* system. Brahmins historically held priestly roles, *kshatriyas* were warriors, *vaishyas* engaged in mercantile activities, where *shudras* were forced to serve others. The first three groups, the dominant *savarnas* or "upper castes" (Vrana

et al., 2019), have imposed *varna* and *jati*-based segregation, forcing one to marry only within their caste, eat certain food and avoid some, to preserve their own marital, food and other social "purity" from being "polluted" through contact with *shudras*, Dalits (Agte and Bernhardt, 2023), Adivasis (mostly Indigenous or non-Hindu ethnic tribes), Muslims and Dalit-Christians. Dalits, a multiethnic and multifaith group severely oppressed by *savarnas*, and *adivasis*, mostly Indigenous or non-Hindu ethnic tribes, are known *bahujans* (majority of the people) or *avarnas* (without a *varna*), and are outside the caste system (Chinnaswamy, 2023). Although rooted in Hinduism, the caste system impacts non-Hindus, especially those converted to other faiths, either retaining socioeconomic advantages or facing marginalisation based on their ancestral caste status. Notably, Indian traditional artists and artisans, predominantly from *shudra* and Dalit communities (Kalyani, 2022), have been historically barred from Hindu temples, which served as repositories for both religious and historical records. Despite legislative efforts to abolish caste-based discrimination following India's independence in 1947, such practices persist due to the dominant *savarnas'* socioeconomic dominance. Many artists adept in modern art forms continue to come from traditional *shudra*, *dalit*, *adivasi* and nomadic tribe artist families, while their art aesthetics depict self-assertion in contrast to *savarna* patronage-based traditional art (Kant, 2014). However, such artists and their communities remain unrecognised for their contributions (Paul and Dowling, 2018) due to their lack of access to official record-keeping or systemic erasure.

2 Caste and Authority Data

Early post-colonial India saw the dominant *savarnas* as early beneficiaries of higher education, securing employment in the public sector and becoming custodians in public offices. They exercised control over the dissemination, preservation, and, at times, the suppression or erasure of knowledge (Paul and Dowling, 2018). Despite publication medium advancements in the post-internet era, curating knowledge remains uneven. Wikipedia and Wikimedia projects accept highly authoritative sources as citations. As public and digital record-keeping processes are primarily associated with *savarnas*, several marginalised

personalities remain out of Wikimedia projects' scope by design. For instance, Dalit Wikipedia editors' contributions and articles about Dalits have been repressed on Wikipedia, which is more for women from Dalit and other historically marginalised groups (Vrana et al., 2019). Since poor online presence and representation result in language model training biases (Jiang et al., 2023), the above gaps could lead to *bahujans*' further exclusion.

Data Collection, Compilation, Enhancement and Curation

In early 2016, the Odisha Lalit Kala Akademi, an Odisha state government-run fine arts academy, released a list of nearly 700 visual artists from Odisha based on their art genres. Of these, only 30 had Wikidata entries, and fewer had external authority identifiers about themselves. Two artists, Rakesh Ratan Nath, the chief compiler of the list, and Paribartana Mohanty, provided insights.

Collaborating with the Getty Research Institute's Union List of Artist Names (ULAN¹), my non-profit, O Foundation, worked to enhance the Akademi data. Over a year, I refined the data, created new Wikidata entries² containing biographical details, including gender and ethnicity information, when available from reliable external sources and native language labels using OpenRefine.

After deduplication and enhancement, the submission included richer data and referenced the Akademi, Nath, Wikidata QIDs, and O Foundation's unique identifiers. The Institute ingested this dataset into its server and generated new ULAN IDs. Once available, I updated Wikidata entries with ULAN IDs. These 700 artists now meet Wikipedia's notability criteria.

Current expansion efforts include a project incorporating 20,000+ new ULAN records of more Odisha-born artisans from the federal textile ministry data. This initiative aims to enhance public knowledge and facilitate connections between buyers and artisans through citable linked data and community engagement.

Findings

Information about historically marginalised individuals and communities is extremely repressed (<https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/systematic-digital-repression-social-media-censoring-of-palestinian-voices/>) due to an imbalance in representation and participation. Indian artists and artisans from such groups experience no or low representation, attribution, and erasure in authoritative texts (Chinnaswamy, 2023), which often continue and proliferate in online publications (Paul and Dowling, 2018).

¹<https://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabularies/ulan/>

²This automated Wikidata list is used for ULAN tracking and curation.

Socioeconomic disparities hinder their access to education and employment, resulting in a lack of biographical data. This paper details a collaborative effort with the Getty Research Institute, which has created nearly 700 artists' ULAN records and Wikidata entries, affirming their notability for Wikipedia. An initiative to add over 20,000 new ULAN records about Odishan artists and artisans is underway.⁴

Discussion

The discussed praxis aims to highlight India's systemic socioeconomic oppression and its impact on the authority data of artists and artisans from oppressed groups. It also provides an interim solution for civil society groups to curate authority data. Historically, the caste system has disproportionately affected individuals from marginalised caste groups, hindering their inclusion in record-keeping practices and artistic curation despite their prominent contribution to arts and crafts (Chinnaswamy, 2023). Abolishing the caste system is a long-term remedy to this barrier. In the interim, Wikimedia Projects need a progressive, nuanced and specific citation process as the generalised and West-centric notability criteria reject many notable marginalised persons from the Global Majority.

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