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**Yarning in *Bethimaran*: Exploring Au/orality as Epistemology in Indigenous Life-writing**

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**Abstract:** This paper examines *Bethimaran*, the autobiographical work of the Ravula writer Sukumaran Chaligatha from Kerala, to propose the concept of sonic epistemology as an interpretive framework emerging from Indigenous life-writing practices. While Indigenous autobiographical narratives are often read through models that privilege indigeneity, self-representation, ecological relations and the collective, this study begins from the premise that such frameworks are inadequate for engaging with texts shaped by oral traditions and relational modes of knowing. Through a close reading of *Bethimaran*, the paper argues that Sukumaran Chaligatha's life narrative foregrounds an epistemology that is both sonic and embodied. His writing draws on oral storytelling practices not merely as a stylistic feature, but as a way of knowing grounded in voice, listening and lived interaction. The text recreates the dynamics of oral communication within print by invoking a speaking voice and an implied listener, producing a sense of performance and shared presence while engaging with the text. By conceptualizing sonic epistemology as a framework attentive to voice, listening and embodiment, the paper demonstrates how *Bethimaran* transforms autobiography into an acoustic and participatory event. Thus, in this context, meaning does not unfold through linear narration alone but emerges through relational engagement and the affective resonance of sound, a concept that has potential in reviewing the ocular-centric modes of representation and documentation. This reorientation challenges the dominance of visibility in literary knowledge production and calls for alternative modes of reading that are responsive to indigenous epistemologies. Situating this argument within a South Asian context, the study contributes to ongoing discussions in Indigenous studies, life-writing and decolonial humanities by foregrounding narrative practices that unsettle conventional assumptions about form, knowledge and representation.

**Keywords:** *Sonic Epistemology, Yarning, Adivasi Life-Writing, Ravula Paatu-Parachil (Song-Storying), Decolonial Documentation*

## Introduction

Indigenous life-writing in South Asia has increasingly drawn critical attention for the ways it unsettles dominant assumptions about subjectivity and narrative form. Conventional approaches to autobiography have often privileged linearity, coherence and individual selfhood, overlooking how Indigenous narratives foreground collective identity, ecological relationality and community memory as constitutive of self-representation. In response, scholars in orality, life-writing and Indigenous studies have emphasised the need for interpretive frameworks capable of accounting for performative, dialogic, and embodied modes of narration (Ong; Smith; Finnegan). Scholarship on Dalit and Adivasi life-writing has further challenged archive-centric models of knowledge by foregrounding mediated experience, collective memory and testimonial narration. Yet, while these studies have expanded understandings of subaltern self-representation, they have rarely examined the sensory and affective modalities, particularly listening, voice and sonic rhythm, through which memory circulates within Indigenous communities. Orality is frequently invoked as a marker of marginalisation or epistemic loss, but its performative operations within written texts remain under-theorised. This gap calls for an approach that understands sound not merely as thematic content, but as a structuring principle of knowledge itself.

This paper addresses that gap through an analysis of *Bethimaran* by Sukumaran Chaligatha, proposing the concept of sonic epistemology to examine how Indigenous autobiographical narratives emerging from oral traditions produce meaning through voice, listening and performance. It argues that *Bethimaran* reconfigures life-writing as an embodied and participatory practice rather than a purely textual form of self-narration. The study asks, how does the text move beyond linear, text-centred narration? In what ways do voice, listening and performance shape the production of meaning? And how might such narrative practices require a rethinking of critical approaches to Indigenous autobiography?

Methodologically, the paper employs close textual reading informed by Indigenous studies and decolonial theory, with particular attention to narrative voice and the evocation of listening as a mode of engagement. Rather than treating orality as a residual feature within print culture, the analysis approaches it as an epistemic structure that organises the text's form and meaning. The authors' positionality also warrants careful consideration. This study is undertaken from outside the Ravula community and does not claim to speak from within its lived experience. Instead, it approaches the text with an awareness of the limits of external interpretation and the ethical demands of reading Indigenous life-writing. The analysis remains committed to engaging respectfully with the text as a situated articulation of knowledge while recognising that such engagement is necessarily partial.

Within this framework, sonic epistemology is proposed not as an imposed theoretical category, but as a concept that emerges from sustained attention to the narrative practices and epistemic orientations of the text itself. Translations from *Bethimaran* cited in this study have been rendered into English by the authors.

Critical engagements with *Bethimaran* have largely situated the text within frameworks of autobiography and *testimonio*, foregrounding questions of collective identity, mediation and genre (Sreehari). While such readings productively resist liberal, individualist models of life-writing, they often remain tied to representational paradigms that privilege narrative content over formal and epistemic concerns. Consequently, the sonic and performative dimensions through which Indigenous knowledge circulates in the text remain underexplored. Moving beyond preservationist and linguistic approaches to Indigenous literature (Sreelakshmi), this paper reads *Bethimaran* as a performative sonic archive. In contrast to interpretations that primarily emphasise caste-based displacement and collective suffering (Sreekala & Shalini), it examines how dialogic and embodied narration reshape autobiography as a mode of situated knowledge-making. By situating *Bethimaran* within an au/oral framework, the article argues that aural and oral registers function within the written text not as residual traces of orality, but as active epistemic forces through which knowledge is produced and transmitted.

### **Yarning, Au/orality, and the Reconfiguration of Narrative Form in *Bethimaran***

The paper examines how in *Bethimaran*, Sukumaran Chaligatha engages with sound at multiple levels, structural, thematic and methodological, drawing attention to sonic practices embedded within the lived realities of the Ravula community. The narrative frequently invokes scenes of speaking and listening where memory is not simply recounted but enacted through voice and relational presence. Sound, in this context, is not an adornment to narration but a medium through which affect and collective experience are articulated. A key practice that informs this narrative mode is yarning, an Indigenous dialogic form of knowledge exchange. Developed within Aboriginal Australian research contexts, yarning has been theorised as a conversational method grounded in relationality, reciprocity and the co-production of meaning (Bessarab & Ng'andu; Walker et al.). It foregrounds storytelling as an interactive and ethical practice in which knowledge emerges through dialogue rather than linear exposition. Yarning thus functions simultaneously as method and epistemology, shaping both the process and structure of communication.

Aboriginal yarning is a fluid ongoing process, a moving dialogue interspersed with interjections, interpretations, and additions. The stories remain in our conscious state like a thread hanging, waiting to be picked up again, to be continued, reconstructed,

reinforced and once again embedded in our ontology. Yarning almost always contains the threads of [indigenous] history as it moves into the present tense, its parameters within present time is filtered through the memories of the past as the two move simultaneously and at points collide and reveals fragments of the future. This type of Aboriginal storytelling or yarning enables Aboriginal [...] people to reconstruct their lives in new ways while at the same time keeping their cultural integrity intact (Geia 15).

While the Ravula context of the text *Bethimaran* is distinct, the narrative employs *pattu-parachil* or song-narration as its primary method, and it is within this indigenous Ravula narrative mode, that its conversationality is rooted. The text exhibits dialogic patterns that resonate with the principles of yarning enacted through storytelling (Bessarab & Ng'andu). Episodes unfold through conversational exchanges and invocations of listeners that together produce a shared communicative space. In this sense, *pattu-parachil* does not merely contain stories; rather, it enables yarning as a performative and interactive practice grounded in reciprocity (Archibald; Smith).

Approaching *Bethimaran* through this framework allows its narrative strategies to be read as enacting a dialogic and relational epistemology within the constraints of print. Although the text exists in written form, its storytelling techniques retain the co-presence characteristic of oral exchange. The implied listener, frequently invoked, becomes integral to meaning-making, transforming the narrative from a monologic artifact into a site of communicative interaction. Within the narrative storytelling functions as the mediating practice through which yarning persists, enabling the continuation of a sonic and relational epistemology within the written form. Such a narrative mode complicates existing theoretical accounts of orality. It neither conforms to pre-scripted literary narration nor aligns with Walter J. Ong's formulation of "secondary orality," which characterises technologically mediated orality as planned and derivative (Ong). Instead, the text appears to sustain the immediacy and relationality of oral exchange within a written medium, producing what may be understood as a third code that unsettles the binary between orality and literacy. This hybrid mode enables the persistence of oral epistemologies without reducing them to textual artefacts. The following section turns to a close reading of selected passages to trace how these dialogic and sonic elements unfold within the text.

### **Sonority, Space and Body**

The orality of the community does not emerge from a singular origin. Rather, it is inherently diverse and deeply rooted in traditional Indigenous knowledge passed down through generations through reciprocal relationships with the human and non-human entities that constitute their habitat and ecology. "When a song begins, everyone merges into it and becomes one. There is no *ooru* (village)

without songs among Indigenous communities. At night, and in moments of sorrow, we find solace in singing. Even during the Kodagu persecution, we sang to endure and drive away our pain” (Chaligatha 61). When indigenous people perform through dance movements and oral patterns, the body enters a rhythmic stance wherein performer and community audience become deeply involved in the performance, resulting in a temporary release from emotion and suffering. The affective quality of their orality allows them to connect with sound and, in turn, with the ecology they inhabit. To ward off pain, they sing traditional songs and stories that temporarily transport them into communal spaces, away from bodily and spatial restrictions. The inclusion of community oral performances thus pushes the limits of what language can accomplish within restrictive spaces. By embedding song within dialogic narration, *Bethimaran* ultimately affirms an epistemology grounded in indigenous lived experience that exceeds the constraints of written form. Thus, when the author claims that they sing songs as a survival mechanism, the author is also stating that the community knowledge on their land and body is employed through singing to withstand the atrocities and injustice meted out to the community by the settlers. As Chaligatha observes, “song forms an integral rhythmic dimension of everyday life” (68), “accompanying moments of happiness, sorrow, ritual practices and rest” (65). This suggests that sound entrains spatial and corporeal relations, producing an affective rhythm that structures communal life which is ingrained in their bodily memory as experiences that create their perceptive world or *umwelten*<sup>1</sup>. Thus, when Sukumaran Chaligatha says that “Like our ancestors, I too go into the forest, hunt wild animals, and eat meat. But today, I do that only in poetry. If we were to eat the food our ancestors once ate, we would be punished today. So, I reclaim it through poetry” (10), the deployment of sonic structures is political beyond its ecological implications as noted by P. Raman in his foreword to the text.

The forest, along with its birds, flora, and fauna, assumes a sonic form in Chaligatha’s poetic language. The roars and trumpeting of animals, the flapping of wings, and the whistles of forest dwellers all become part of Sukumaran’s poetic expression. Even when writing in prose, his language remains deeply sonic, shaped by an organic intimacy with nature. Sukumaran’s poetic renderings offer a vivid articulation of this sonority (9–10).

The community gradually attunes itself to the sonic sensibilities and rhythmic patterns of the space it inhabits. The cultural meanings associated with a place are shaped and transformed through the activities, practices, and narratives that organise that space. The rhythm of the land is therefore absorbed into the orality of Indigenous life, producing an intimate relationship between sound, space,

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<sup>1</sup> the perceptive world of an organism

and the body. Although we encounter multiple realities and spatialities within our physical *umwelt*, we often remain oriented toward only a few. Space and matter thus work together to give meaning to sensory signs. The rhythm of a space becomes legible through its relation to corporeal and sensory experience, making inhabited space an extension of being itself. Indigenous communities often demonstrate a profound environmental attunement in which both somatic and psychological systems align closely with the surrounding ecology.

The Indigenous Ravula community maintains an intimate relationship with sonic rhythm, as lived affect is often articulated through songs, chants, and performative verse. Emotional states, ritual practices, labour, and leisure are frequently mediated through rhythm. The absence of script-based traditions further intensifies their organic relationship with sound and language, which emerges from lived experience and ecological intimacy through sensory perception and cognition. A significant part of Ravula communication operates through au/orality, both aural and oral, a verbal semiotic order that is more indexical and performative than symbolic, closely tied to communal action and lived experience. For the Ravula people, language and space function collaboratively. Songs emerge when community members gather for labour, ritual or leisure, and oral compositions remain collective and fluid, with participants contributing lines in the moment. As Sukumaran Chaligatha recalls in his memoir, “There are no songs that are sung regularly. While going to the forest for firewood, fishing, farming, or during rituals for ancestral spirits, songs emerge. Men and women sit together and sing. Ponna or Mara among them may begin humming...*Kattonduvantha kaippekkay! Maare maamikkellam chokkippoye...*” (62). Linguistic performance enacts space even as space shapes language. The rhythm and tonality of Ravula speech often mimic the ecology in which it is embedded, incorporating the acoustic signs of nature into everyday communication. When these linguistic rhythms are disrupted, their *umwelt* is also affected, since orality sustains communal rhythm, ethical relations, and collective consciousness. Chaligatha further demonstrates how oral narratives function as forms of place-memory. Songs and stories map landscapes through ancestral histories,

When my father’s elder sister sees me, she calls me ‘Maarivayalu Maarachan.’ She told me many stories in my childhood. We would visit her just to hear them. I encountered all those places through song-stories- it was a journey through songs. Our *kuladaivam* (community deity), Yatheem-achan, has a path through which he arrives. While travelling that path, you see all these places. I loved experiencing them this way. These songs never change (77).

These oral narratives function as forms of place-lore, binding language to land and producing a deep sense of belonging. Chaligatha also recreates space through performative voice and communal song,

shifting communication from symbolic textuality to embodied, affective exchange. This is evident in the naming of stones, “We call each stone by names such as Manivayalu Maracchan, Jogi, Malakkari, Karikali, and Pagathi... every stone has a name, Chowtti, Kalyanakarrara, and so on. Each has its own story” (76). Sound here operates not merely as an auditory phenomenon but as an affective and epistemological force. Through dialogic narration, Chaligatha recreates the embodied resonance of oral performance within written text. This relationship becomes particularly fragile when Indigenous communities are displaced into settlement “colonies,” where orality is alienated from its sensory and spatial grounding. Ravula communities prefer the term *ooru* rather than “colony,” as it signifies home and collective identity. Naming itself becomes a site of resistance. As P. Raman notes in the preface, Chaligatha rejected externally imposed labels such as *Adiya*, “I remember Sukumaran insisting that the name of his community and language was not Adiya but Ravula, and that the name Adiya, given by outsiders who exploited Indigenous people, was unacceptable to them” (9). The movement of Indigenous expression into script therefore marks a significant epistemological shift. Rather than merely entering textual archives, works such as *Bethimaran* disrupt ocular-centric modes of preservation by carrying forward community-based sonic and performative knowledge systems into written form.

The interspersion of Ravula language with the dominant regional language, Malayalam, generates a significant political intervention. It facilitates the movement of Ravula vocabulary, idioms, rhythms and expressive structures into mainstream linguistic space, reversing what had historically been a one-sided cultural flow in which settler languages and communicative practices were imposed upon Indigenous communities. Before the emergence of Indigenous writing, Ravula linguistic practices remained largely confined to intimate communal spaces and were frequently discouraged through colonial and cultural mechanisms of control. By articulating Ravula experience through Malayalam script, Sukumaran Chaligatha reclaims linguistic agency while simultaneously unsettling dominant literary conventions. As Chaligatha notes, translation into Malayalam often diminishes the aesthetic and sonic qualities of Ravula expression, revealing the limits of translating Indigenous oral forms into dominant textual languages. The tonal shifts, cadence, and musicality of Ravula songs frequently resist complete translation. Yet transliteration and code-mixing preserve traces of these sonic textures, allowing Ravula orality to remain audible within script and inviting non-Indigenous readers into its affective and performative world. The friction produced through translation and transliteration also exposes the prosaic conventions of Malayalam textuality, while foregrounding the musicality of Ravula oral poetry even when both versions retain similar prosodic structures.

As a primarily oral language without an established script tradition, Ravula evolves through conversational exchange, ritual performance, repetition, and collective memory. Its linguistic structures

emerge through communal practice rather than fixed textual conventions. Consequently, when Ravula enters script, the process is neither a simple act of translation into Malayalam nor an attempt to preserve Ravula in a pure or untouched form. Instead, the interaction between Ravula orality and Malayalam textuality produces what could be named as a third code, a hybrid communicative register that is neither standard Malayalam nor purely oral Ravula. Ravula gains textual visibility through Malayalam script, while Malayalam itself absorbs Indigenous rhythms, vocabularies, dialogic patterns, and song structures. Through this reciprocal exchange, both languages are transformed. This politics of linguistic agency also extends to naming practices. As already noted, Chaligatha rejects the externally imposed label *Adiya* and reasserts *Ravula* as the rightful name of both the community and its language. Such acts of self-naming resist dominant linguistic frameworks that historically positioned Indigenous communities within structures of servitude and marginality. Reclaiming Indigenous nomenclature therefore becomes an assertion of cultural sovereignty and epistemic self-definition.

The movement of Indigenous experience into script thus marks a crucial epistemological shift. Rather than merely entering written archives, *Bethimaran* carries community-based sonic, performative, and relational forms of knowledge into literary discourse, challenging ocular-centric modes of preservation and demonstrating how Indigenous au/orality can continue to inhabit and transform textual space.

### ***Kadha Kettundu Oom Gooduvo - Let's Hum to Stories***

This section, titled after a chapter in the memoir, exemplifies how oral yarning constitutes an integral part of indigenous community epistemology and how the speaker emphasises two foundational aspects of yarning, listening and speaking, through instances drawn from his childhood and community traditions.

Among them, there would be an elderly woman who narrated stories. She would gather the boys and girls together and explain everything through storytelling. During the narration, the children would hum from time to time, signalling their attention and curiosity. My own process of writing stories resembles this mode of narration; my stories, too, are filled with such hums.

*'Pandu pandillayo...'* (Long, long ago...)

*'Oom...'*

*'Avdeyoru cheriya pennundayirunnu...'* (There was a little girl...)

*'Oom...'*

*'Avalennum enthechu kowunchichu...'* (Do you know what she used to do all the

time?)  
'Oom...'

This is how stories are narrated among us. At times, the voice rises or falls in accordance with the rhythm of the lines. Through stories, elders pass on their experiential knowledge to younger generations. Alongside humans, creatures such as owls, pigs, foxes and others also inhabit these stories. These stories are not read from anywhere but, they are created by us. There are also stories that empower young girls. They prepare children to face the challenges they may encounter in the future (Chaligatha 52–54).

The representation of humming sounds is significant in the context of Ravula storytelling, as such sounds are culturally specific and carry affective memory within the community. The narrative tempo of *Bethimaran*, which often mimics breath and oral speech, is reflected in its fragmented sentence structures, abrupt two-word utterances, strategic line breaks and irregular spacing. Continuous prose frequently shifts into verse-like formations to indicate pauses, emphasis and at times, tonal variations. In such moments, meaning emerges not solely through semantic content but through rhythmic patterns, vocal inflection and even silence.

Yarning also demands an ethical relation between speaker and listener, where the audience listens attentively and allows the narrator to complete their story without interruption. Through this participatory process, readers are invited not only to read the script but also to listen to the affective sounds produced by the speaking body and registered through their own corporeality. Kaur conceptualises embodied listening as an affective process in which sensory and emotional intensities are experienced through the body, suggesting that listening operates through a “sound body” rather than merely through the auditory act of hearing (20). This embodied transmission of knowledge is reflected in Chaligatha’s recollection of listening to elders:

When I was in the fourth standard, they used to tell many interesting stories from Kodagu. They would sing the songs they sang there, along with the newer songs and stories they had created. They also spoke about natural resources such as fish and rivers in those places. We gained a great deal of knowledge from them through these song-stories (31).

Such exchanges produce what Deborah Kapchan terms “sound knowledge” (21) a form of nondiscursive, affectively transmitted knowledge that circulates through voice and performance. By incorporating yarning as a narrative method, *Bethimaran* foregrounds the co-production of knowledge

and cultivates ethical relations between storyteller and listener. This intention is evident in the preface, where Sukumaran Chaligatha clarifies that, like his poetry, *Bethimaran* is not a sentimental account of Adivasi poverty or helplessness, but an intimate portrayal of Indigenous life shaped by lived experience. This oral epistemology becomes even more significant when read alongside the text's already noted spoken-and-transcribed form. Rather than conforming to Walter J. Ong's notion of "secondary orality," which presumes technologically mediated and pre-scripted speech, *Bethimaran* retains the spontaneity of conversational rhythms, interruptions, and affective modulation. Its transcribed form demonstrates how Indigenous au/orality can inhabit print while preserving the immediacy of oral exchange. Thus, the text reveals how Indigenous knowledge continues to circulate through sonic memory and relational listening even within written form. The text records,

Our community possesses a treasure-house of songs, riddles, and long narrative songs created for collective singing, participation, and enjoyment. [...] We pass them on to our children through rhythmic narration, almost as though reading from a book. We sing about animals, rivers, and stones. We also have fascinating riddle-songs.

*'Kadhe kadhe kambala kanchiyathey*  
*Kanchikudippa puttellukkupponney*  
*Puttelliloru achuliyintha*  
*Achuli kettuva ballikkupponney*  
*Balli balichappo barekkuthaboonthey*  
*Bareyenniyey thantha mannu thantha*  
*Mannennene cheythe thumerukkittey*  
*Thumerennene thantha pullu thantha*  
*Pullennene cheythe paikku koduthey*  
*Paiyennene thantha paalu thantha*  
*Paalennene cheythe thattengu koduthey*  
*Thattennene thantha choru thantha*  
*Chorennene cheythe*

*Thumerunte mettili lechangu thinttey.*' There are songs like these that are sung in a single breath. Do you know how many lines such songs contain? They carry the whole of our lives within them- everything (65-66).

*Bethimaran*, through its performative mode of narration, generates affective intensities by incorporating the speaker's voice within a dialogic structure rather than adhering to conventional ocular-centric writing practices, where affect is often diminished within script and textual form. The

text restores agency and voice to Indigenous experience that has long been mediated through mainstream representations. Listening, in this context, becomes an embodied practice that produces sensorial memory and knowledge. As Kaur notes, embodied listening allows affective intensities to accumulate within the body, generating visceral dispositions and responses beyond deliberate cognition (20). The readers and listeners of Sukumaran Chaligatha thus become participants in a yarnning circle, resonating with Hirschkind's argument that listening engages "the human sensorium in its entirety" (28). Through attentive engagement with this acoustic event, listeners are conditioned "through sensory attunement and ethical sedimentation", producing an ethical and affective relation between speaking and listening bodies (Hirschkind 28). This participatory structure is evident in Chaligatha's frequent use of direct address, conversational interruptions, and call-and-response patterns. Questions such as "Aren't these nice lines?" (64) invites readers into active participation rather than passive reception. Similarly, markers such as "listen", "you know", "I will tell you", alongside minimal punctuation, recreate the continuity of oral storytelling and generate a sense of co-presence between narrator and audience. Reading thereby becomes an affective and relational act.

This ethical engagement is particularly visible in the text's reflections on Indigenous naming practices, where identity is preserved through communal memory rather than scriptural registration. Chaligatha recalls that among the Ravula people, names were recognised orally within the *chemmam* (clan or kinship lineage), often carrying ancestral, spatial, or spiritual significance. Outsider interventions, however, gradually displaced these systems through bureaucratic renaming practices undertaken in schools and official documentation. He recounts how his birth name, *Bethimaran*, was changed to *Sukumaran* upon entering school because the former was considered unsuitable by non-Indigenous authorities. Similar alterations affected the names of his parents and relatives, severing names from their cultural and spiritual contexts. Sukumaran notes,

When I was admitted to school, I was given the name 'Bethimaran'. But they changed it. A teacher said that it sounded like an old man's name and insisted on changing it to Sukumaran. I was deeply saddened, though I was not even five years old then [...] My father's original name was 'Jachan', but outsiders changed it to 'Rajan'. My mother's name was 'Machi', the name of one of our deities, but it became 'Shantha' in official records [...] Our elders know me as Bethimaran because that was the name given by them (21).

These instances reveal how script-based systems of documentation often invalidate oral epistemologies by treating Indigenous identities as legitimate only when recognised through bureaucratic records. Renaming thus becomes a form of epistemic violence that restructures communal memory according

to mainstream administrative frameworks. Against this backdrop, yarning emerges as a reparative epistemic practice that rebuilds collective identity. Chaligatha describes *Nalume*, a communal gathering where songs, memories, disputes and relationships are collectively negotiated through performance and participation. Songs do not belong to an individual composer but emerge through communal improvisation and circulation. “Songs are released when people from all our regions gather together. If one person sings two lines, others continue from there. New lines are woven into the song collectively. Everyone sings together, and no one belittles another’s song [...] We simply call it a ‘song’, not a ‘folk song’” (62). Through such practices, language becomes inseparable from communal participation and affective belonging. Chaligatha further notes that outsiders often fail to grasp the layered meanings embedded within these performances, engaging with them merely as “folk songs” without understanding the lived histories and relational worlds carried within them (70).

### ***Paatu (Song) and Recording Identities***

Language also functions as a tool through which community identities may be undermined, reshaped, or reclaimed. When Indigenous communities rooted in oral traditions are made to perceive their language as inferior, the effects extend beyond communication into questions of existence, belonging, and self-worth. Settler interventions frequently disrupted Indigenous life-worlds through symbolic linguistic practices such as renaming, documentation and institutional translation. As discussed earlier, names were often imposed upon the Ravula people by outsiders through schools and bureaucratic systems, severing identity from ancestral memory and community recognition. Education framed as “upliftment” thus frequently operated as an instrument of assimilation rather than empowerment.

Against this backdrop, *Bethimaran* produces what may be understood as a veritable Indigenous body within print. Through narration and transcription, Chaligatha creates a textual voice that remains distinctly oral, interspersed with songs, chants, and communal speech rhythms that evoke the atmosphere of a yarning circle. Sound is embedded within text not merely as content but as an epistemic mode that exceeds the limits of scriptural representation. This commitment to sonic embodiment is also evident in Chaligatha’s compositional practice. He first writes in Ravula, recognising that the affective dimensions of Indigenous experience are rooted in the primary language shaped by body and space, before translating into Malayalam as a form of archival preservation. As he remarks in relation to his poem *A Silent Goodbye*, he “felt that I had marked Kodagu history” through writing (33). Translation here does not simply reproduce meaning but creates a semiotic space through which Indigenous experience remains affectively and sonically present even within a dominant textual language.

The contrast between this affective mode of inscription and mainstream bureaucratic documentation is striking. Chaligatha juxtaposes the notebook registers maintained by landlords in Kodagu, where Indigenous labourers were recorded only through imposed names and partial accounts, with his own poetic responses to exploitation and displacement. These registers functioned less as systems of accountability than as instruments of surveillance and denial, often used to withhold wages while reducing Indigenous lives to abstract entries devoid of communal meaning. The names recorded in such documents frequently bore little relation to how individuals were known within their own communities. In opposition to this archival violence, Chaligatha's poetry restores corporeal presence to Indigenous experience. Rather than naming a single individual, poems such as *A Silent Goodbye* speak to the condition of countless unnamed Indigenous bodies rendered invisible within official records. Through affective narration, the poetic voice produces a body capable of sounding, feeling, remembering and resisting. The text repeatedly emphasises how ecological and linguistic worlds became estranged through outsider intervention. As Chaligatha notes, "so many things in our language became strange to us" (23). By reproducing Ravula linguistic textures, code-mixing and sonic rhythm, the text reanimates material and cultural worlds erased through dominant scriptural processes.

Songs occupy a particularly important role within this collective memory system. Chaligatha recalls that many songs survive only through communal remembrance, "There are so many songs that one should rake one's memory to retrieve, because they are not written down but preserved in people's memory" (64). Through oral yarning, embodied listening and performative narration, *Bethimaran* therefore articulates an Indigenous epistemology grounded in relational memory rather than archival fixation. This communal nature of song is especially visible in *Nalume* gatherings, where songs emerge collectively through participation and repetition rather than individual authorship:

*Aakaillo ee kaillo*

*Appenta nookka karrikaillo*

*Ammente nukka kaillo*...This was the beginning of a popular song from that gathering. I do not know who composed it. Even a song becomes part of the gathering there. It becomes the song of the community, and the composer becomes anonymous (Chaligatha 63).

Here, song functions not as private artistic expression but as communal performance and memory-making. Yarning, similarly, operates at multiple levels within the text. As a cultural practice, it is rooted in listening, and collective participation. Structurally, it shapes the narrative through dialogic address, interruptions, repetition and non-linear movement, resisting the coherence expected of conventional autobiographical writing. Methodologically, yarning

becomes a mode of knowledge production in which meaning emerges relationally between speaker and listener rather than through isolated self-expression. The text therefore does not merely represent yarnning as content but enacts it formally through its narrative structure.

### **Dialogical Narration in *Bethimaran***

Throughout *Bethimaran*, Chaligatha speaks less as an isolated autobiographical subject than as a voice emerging from collective community memory. The pronoun “I,” central to conventional autobiographical discourse, appears far less frequently than “we,” suggesting that individual identity is inseparable from communal consciousness. Personal memories are repeatedly narrated as shared experiences, aligning with Indigenous yarnning practices described by Lynore K. Geia, who argues that Indigenous stories rarely emerge as purely individual constructs (15). The text also directly addresses an audience situated largely outside the Indigenous community. This becomes evident through its explanatory narrative mode, where customs, rituals, naming practices, labour experiences, songs and belief systems are narrated for listeners unfamiliar with Ravula life-worlds. The arrangement of chapters reflects this movement between individual and communal experience. Personal chapters concerning schooling, labour, poetry and writing are interwoven with chapters on songs, rituals, storytelling and collective gatherings, producing a spiral narrative structure similar to the cyclical song-story forms performed during *Nalume*. This cyclical structure is reinforced formally through the absence of strict chronological progression and the text’s abrupt conclusion. Rather than moving toward narrative closure, *Bethimaran* invites re-entry from multiple points without disrupting meaning. The final chapter, *Mukharillatha Devaru* (“Faceless Gods”), exemplifies this unconventional ending. Instead of offering autobiographical resolution, Chaligatha concludes with reflections on Ravula systems and everyday forms of spirituality grounded in nature and ancestral presence, “We do not pray with folded palms or make *kanikka* offerings. We simply go there and remain. That is all” (73). The text thus resists linear autobiographical closure and sustains a rhythmic circulation of memory, space, body, and sound. Childhood memories, labour experiences, rituals, songs, ecological relations, and communal histories continually return through repetition and affective narration. In doing so, *Bethimaran* unsettles ocular-centric modes of ethnographic observation and scriptural documentation, replacing them with performative, relational, and oral epistemologies grounded in voice and listening.

### **Conclusion**

*Bethimaran* demonstrates how Indigenous autobiographical writing can sustain oral performance traditions within print without relinquishing their cultural and epistemic significance. This paper has

argued that the songs, chants, dialogic exchanges, rituals, myths and communal storytelling practices embedded in the text function not merely as remnants of orality but as structuring principles that organize narration, memory and affect. Through song lyrics, poetic interludes, conversational narration and call-and-response patterns, the text retains an affective and performative voice that continually exceeds the limits of conventional autobiographical prose. Even its paratextual elements such as titles, subtitles, dedications and chapter divisions reinforce sonic registers through rhythmic phrasing, communal reference and performative cues.

The analysis of sections such as *Kadha Kettondu Oom Gooduvo* and *Paatu* demonstrates how sonic epistemology operates simultaneously as theme, narrative structure and methodological intervention. Yarning emerges not simply as a represented cultural practice but as a relational mode of knowledge production grounded in reciprocity and communal participation. Similarly, songs function as mnemonic structures that preserve collective histories through performance. Narrative temporality in *Bethimaran* therefore remains circular and recursive rather than linear, reflecting oral modes of remembrance and storytelling. Episodic narration, repetition of motifs, digressive movement and memory-based sequencing together produce what may be understood as a performance epistemology structured through au/orality.

The text's incorporation of poems, chants, ritual songs, and translated oral verses further demonstrates how Indigenous knowledge inhabits print without surrendering performativity. By placing *Chaddhukaanatha Orru Tata* alongside its translated version, *A Silent Goodbye*, and by weaving communal oratures into prose narration, *Bethimaran* transforms the printed page into a performative space that invites readers to hear voice rather than merely process information. As Chaligatha remarks, "Today's social media haiku poems were introduced by our people way back in the forest" (52), foregrounding the continuity between oral creativity and contemporary literary forms. The movement from oral narration to writing in Indigenous autobiographical practice is therefore not a simple transition of medium but a rearticulation of memory, history and relational knowledge through sonic patterning.

By foregrounding au/orality as a performative epistemology, *Bethimaran* unsettles ocular-centric literary conventions that privilege textual closure and scriptural authority. Instead, print becomes a resonant medium capable of sustaining relational ethics. The emergence of a third code through the interaction of Ravula orality and Malayalam textuality further reveals how Indigenous literary practices transform dominant linguistic structures while simultaneously gaining textual visibility. This study therefore contributes to ongoing debates in decolonial studies, Indigenous literary criticism and autobiography studies by challenging the assumption that writing necessarily diminishes oral

knowledge systems. Rather than treating sound as an aesthetic supplement to textual meaning, the analysis has demonstrated how sonic structures actively organize narration, shape readerly engagement, and produce ethical relations through embodied listening. The article proposes au/orality as a critical framework for reading Indigenous life-writing that emerges from relational and performative epistemologies. *Bethimaran* ultimately positions Indigenous autobiography not as an imperfect translation of oral culture into print, but as a site of epistemic innovation where voice, memory and communal presence continually reconfigure literary form.

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