



Echoes Of The Past: Traditional Knowledge And Cultural Identity In Odisha's Tribal Communities

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Abstract: Traditional knowledge attributes to an enormous realm of wisdom and belief elaborately intertwined with the cultural artifact of indigenous and regional communities. The knowledge developed by their close interaction with the environment and transmitted through generations by oral tradition, frequently finds expression in the intricate web of performing folk art. Cultural identity is the wide sense of belonging to a mass, a central element of one's self-conception and worldview, which is characterized by its own distinctive traditions and customs. The state Odisha consists of different tribal groups which comprises communities like the Kondhs, Gonds, Santhals and the Bondas. The traditional wisdom and distinct cultural identities of these tribes formed the essence of these indigenous groups. The paper aims to explore the traditional knowledge systems of these tribes of Odisha and their cultural expression. The study further seeks to highlight the ways adopted by these tribal communities to transmit the knowledge. The analysis also investigates the procedure for preserving the cultural identities and ancient knowledge of these tribal communities. Furthermore, it will consider the challenges these communities encounter in the modern era, marked by globalization, encroaching development, and modernization, questioning the existence of their traditions in a dynamic world. Thus, this paper endeavours to examine the complex relationship between traditional indigenous knowledge and the cultural identity of tribal communities, alongside the ways of preserving and cultivating the abundant cultural legacy of Odisha's tribes.

Key Words- Traditional Knowledge, Cultural Identity, Tribal Communities, Modernization, Odisha.

I. INTRODUCTION

The geographical location of Odisha is inhabited by different cultural groups of people because the state comprises a huge number of tribal communities (Garada 63). These communities generally stayed in exotic and interior areas of the land where tribal people have developed a close connection with their native lands, soil, and ancestral roots (64). The ancient wisdom possessed by these tribal communities serves as a central part of their day to day lives. Traditional knowledge comprises fields such as agricultural occupation, storytelling, their craftsmanship, and holy spiritual practices. Tribal communities are often seen as the steward of this knowledge system cause the natural surrounding provides them everything they need for sustenance. It is believed that this ancient wisdom is the mirror of the social reality of tribal communities about their viewpoint of whole world while they inhabit their native land (Rajendra 107).

The current study looks for the ways tribal communities of Odisha work to preserve their heritage and transmits to the next generation. The significant role ancient wisdom serves to establish their communal and collective identity is a crucial field of investigation. Scholars suggest that investigating the ancient ways to meet the contemporary issues assists the understanding of humankind why preserving the ancient is necessary for our future (Mishra 96). The paper through the detailed examination of tribal communities' rituals and their customs highlight the significance of ancient ways when the world is changing rapidly. The persisting practice of ancient wisdom, its continuation and respect are evident in the current globalized world.

The paper is significant in its detailed examination of the threads which tie these tribal indigenous communities of Odisha. The perspectives of tribal communities are way different than the modernized civilization. Instead of viewing the ancient tradition as backward or primitive, they perceive these ancient ways as a living force that shapes their identity in present era. In the fast-growing global world, the voice of the native people is usually silenced when people forget their roots. This paper thus seeks to subvert the current notions surrounding the ancient wisdom. The profound wisdom evident in the tribal groups are examined to strengthen the harmonious bond human beings share with the nature. The protection of old echoes is crucial to safeguard the cultural heritage. Alongside respecting the tribal communities supplements the diversity of culture that withhold us all.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The paper “Documenting Indigenous Traditional Knowledge in Odisha” (2010) by Mahalik and Mahapatra illuminates the enduring importance and major role of tribal knowledge systems within the different tribal communities of Odisha. The paper highlights the rootedness of the tribal indigenous knowledge into their social and cultural contexts which possess the ability to adapt the specific requirements and challenges faced by the tribal people. The study seeks for a nuanced exploration and comprehensive efforts for the documentation and preservation of the tribal knowledge systems in the backdrop of the ongoing global modernization.

Mahapatra in her article “Tribes of Odisha and Issue of Social Inclusion, Exclusion and Cultural Assimilation” (2013) investigates the complex issues encountered by Odisha’s tribal communities regarding the inclusion, exclusion and assimilation. The paper explores Odisha as a habitat to 62 distinctive tribal communities whose population is 22.19% of the regions total demographic data that is around 9 million. The paper delves into the continuous evolving characteristics of the society and its culture that inherently influence the engagement of the tribal groups with the dynamics of the developing world. The paper concludes on a note that despite the social shift and progress of the nation the tribal population remains socially excluded and marginalized from the economic developments. The limitation in access to basic needs such as education, health services and infrastructural development further aggravate their exclusion.

Anil Ota’s paper “Disappearing Material Culture of Tribals in India: The Case of a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups of Southern Odisha” (2015) offers a nuanced into the challenges faced by the tribals of Southern part of the state and their ancestral practices. The paper highlights the expanding shifts between the traditional customs and the growth of the modernity through the community Lanjia Saora. The arrival of modern systems into their lifestyle possesses a threat of extinction to their existing traditional knowledge and customary practices. The external factors including globalization, economic development and the limited reach of the mainstream advancements further aids to the erosion of their inherent cultural foundations.

Raveena Nidhi in her study on “Traditional Knowledge for Sustainable Practices: Indigenous Tribal People’s Cognizance of Climate Change” (2024) investigates the crucial standpoint on the indigenous tribal knowledge system to combat the current issues such as climate change and sustainable practices. The paper offers that the tribal communities are the stewards of the ecology and environment. The paper simultaneously cultivates the complex understanding of the changing weather patterns, ecological indicators and sustainable practices for resource management to meet the need of the future generations. The study calls for the significance of exploring and assimilating this tribal wisdom into the modern fields of policy inclusion to establish a collaborative relationship between the tribal communities and the mainstream developments which can offer more innovative ways for a safe and sustainable future.

Sudhanshubala and Manoj Tripathy’s paper “Revival of Tribal Fashion and Lifestyle: A Case Study of Western Odisha” (2024) highlights the significant influence of the cultural heritage of tribal communities on the contemporary fashion trends. The paper explores the appreciation for tribal cultural art among the fashion industries and the modern consumers in national as well as global level. The lack of training at technical level to these tribal communities possess hurdles for promotion of their artistic skills despite its substantial treasures. The study argues for the need of programme specially designed to empower these strata of the society. It further advocates for the significance of collaborative work among public as well as private sectors to support and promote these local artisans and their art. The paper further seeks to revive tribal lifestyle and

fashion sense by means of training, partnerships and the assimilation of social media for recognizing their cultural identity and sustain these practices.

III. OBJECTIVES

The present study seeks to explore the traditional knowledge of different tribes of Odisha and their cultural expression. The analysis further highlights the process of knowledge transmission in tribal communities. The paper also investigates the procedure for the preservation and challenges encountered by the tribal population. Thus, this paper endeavours to preserve the cultural legacy of Odisha's tribes.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The data for the present study is collected from both primary and secondary sources. Reports on the existing surveys, policy documentations and literature on tribal knowledge system and tribal development in Odisha has been analysed. Further the descriptive analysis method is utilized to compile the various data available on digital resources such as books and journal articles. The government reports compiled in open educational resources is accumulated for a comprehensive study.

V. KEY DISCUSSIONS

5.1. TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

'Traditional knowledge' which is also referred as 'indigenous knowledge,' encompass, a collective worldview, innovations, and practices. The ancient wisdom of the indigenous communities is deeply ingrained in the prevailing cultural belief systems that embody their ways of life. In everyday discourse, 'traditional' refers to a system of knowledge passed down through generations, both orally and in written form. This knowledge is grounded in empirical observation and is inherently creative. Traditional knowledge, therefore, is always community-specific, and, by its nature, it is constantly evolving, adapting to the ever-changing environment (Grenier 1).

ODISHA AND THE TRIBAL COMMUNITY

As per 2011 Census India's tribal population is approximately 104.3 million, which is 8.6 percent of the nation's population. Odisha is home to over 62 tribal communities such as the Santal, Gond, Kondh, Munda, and Saora. These tribes predominantly reside in the forest and hilly regions of Odisha. According to the Census of 2011, Odisha's tribal people comprises around 22.85% in the entire population of Odisha. This makes Odisha the third-largest state in India in terms of its diverse ethnic groups, including tribal communities (Office of the Registrar General 2011).

The Santhal community, primarily found in the regions of Mayurbhanj, Balesore, and Keonjhar, speak the Santali language. The Gond reside in the districts of Nowrangpur, Nuapada, Bolangir, and Kalahandi, speaks both Gondi and Odia. The Khond people, inhabit Rayagada, Kandhamal, Kalahandi, and Koraput, speak the Kui and Kuvi languages. The Saora dwell in the mountains of southern Odisha, particularly in Baragarh, Gajapati, Rayagada, and Bolangir speaking the Sora language. The Munda community, live in the districts of Sundergarh, Sambalpur, and Keonjhar, speaks the Mundari language (Baliarsingh 75-76). Revered as the first settlers, they were pioneers who cleared forests and laid the foundation for village life.

FOUNDATIONS OF TRADITIONAL WISDOM

Traditional wisdom is a substantial storehouse of accumulated knowledge and customary practices of Indigenous communities. The ancestral knowledge is rooted in a variety of traditions, material as well as immaterial (Dalal 22).

(i) Beliefs and Practices: Indigenous knowledge is interwoven with rituals, ceremonies, and customs which function as vessels through which valuable insights are passed down.

ii) Oral Tradition: Much of indigenous knowledge exists beyond written records and passed down orally within the community. Elders, storytellers, and traditional healers are the custodians of this wisdom.

iii) Sacred Scriptures and Ethnographic Documentations: Holy scriptures such as the Bhagavad Gita, Vedas, Puranas, alongside cultural archives offer intricate accounts of biotechnical methods, medicinal knowledge, agricultural practices, and cultural rituals that highlight a legacy of wisdom for future generations.

iv) Human Experiences: Experiential knowledge of humans among members within their community are shared across their generations by means of oral accounts as well as community-based traditions offering profound knowledge of their diverse life experiences.

v) Archaeological Remains: Archaeological finds, antiquities, tools and recovered geographical sites often plays as a significant physical relic of the customs and practices of indigenous communal lives. These sites provide a nuanced understanding of the historic specimens and technological advancements of the ancient times.

MODERNIZATION REPLACING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

Indigenous knowledge despite its profound significance is under the looming prospect of disintegration and dislocation caused by the dynamics of urbanization in Odisha. With the accelerated transition of modernization, urbanization and globalization of the society, the increasing inclination in favour of modernity at the expense of traditional knowledge arises. The major vehicle that supplants traditional wisdom at the expense of modern system is the Institutional learning system. Current educational content frequently diminishes the value of indigenous wisdom, casting it as primitive or obsolete. Consequently, younger generations within tribal communities are becoming more detached from their ancestral teachings, gravitating towards institutionalized learning which privilege that prioritizes dominant empirical models (Faiz 4). Furthermore, Modernization initiatives such as infrastructural projects and developmental advancement frequently neglect ancient wisdom in favour of modernization. The traditional inhabitants are often uprooted from their indigenous territory because of economic expansion efforts such as mining, hydroelectric projects and various industries establishments that destabilizes their understanding of the ecology and customary practices.

Moreover, cultural globalization and the homogenizing influence of the media play a significant role in destabilizing the ancient wisdom and cultivate westernized way of living and consumerist ideals. The increasing exposure of younger generations within the tribal communities to modern consumerist culture through media results in adoption of contemporary ideals and gradually detaching from cultural roots (Ghosh and Banerjee 223). The loss of viability in customary rural sustenance practice drives the tribal youth to industrial centres in pursuit of job opportunities, hence detaching them from their ancestral heritage of agrarian practice and indigenous wisdom.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TRADITIONAL WISDOM AND MODERN SCIENTIFIC PARADIGMS

The wisdom possessed by the indigenous communities or tribal groups and the rational or scientific paradigms are two distinctive yet intertwined perspectives of acquiring knowledge and sustaining in the world. The table below comprehends the points of distinction and interaction between these two systems:

	INDIGENOUS TRADITIONAL WISDOM	MODERN KNOWLEDGE PARADIGMS
Epistemology of learning	lived experiences, oral traditions, and communal practices	formal education, scientific investigation, and technological progress
Scope and Application	holistic and context-driven used in agriculture, healthcare, spirituality, and community governance	specialized and segmented applied in biology, physics, engineering, economics healthcare, agriculture, technology, and industry
Approach to Problem-solving	holistic and relational approach	Deconstructing, reductionist, and analytical approach
Relationship with the Environment	promote sustainable resource management, the conservation of biodiversity, and ecological stewardship	anthropocentric perspective and human's dependence on the environment
Cultural and Ethical Considerations	entwined with cultural identity, spirituality, and community's values	value-neutral and objective
Potential for Integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> scientific precision rooted in environmental stewardship ensuring relevance to culture Allied, inter and multidisciplinary strategies in research Community-based and collaborative approaches in fields such as environmental conservation, public health, and community development 	

CULTURAL IDENTITY

“Unity in Diversity” is a time-honoured tradition of nation like India. Each community whether they belong to tribal group or non-tribal group, historically settling in this region features distinct characteristics expressed through artistic, linguistic, musical and customary practices collectively recognized as part of ‘culture’. Despite notable distinctions and differences persisting on various matters, each group is defined by its own unique ethnic roots. Therefore, the identity of a culture embodies an attachment to a specific community (Bihari 24). Nowadays the identity entwines with various other categories such as class, locality, religion and nationality. Different tribal groups are distinguished by age-old customs and varied artistic creations of their respective communities. This includes: (i) Ritualistic Traditions, (ii) Performing Arts, (iii) Apparels and Adornments, and (iv) Puppetry and Wall Paintings.

RITUALISTIC TRADITIONS

The indigenous communities of Odisha hold a unique yet distinctive cultural identity which is mostly influenced by their remarkable rituals and festivities. Communities like Santhal are advocates the beginning of sowing season with the celebration of Erok-sim, likewise Harihar-sim is celebrated to mark the season of seeds sprouting. Iri-gudi-sim is offering of small millets to their deity, invoking blessings for an abundant harvest. Sohrai is dedicated to the worship of cattle, integral to their agrarian lifestyle. Magha-sim unites the community in joyous dancing and revelry. Chaitra Parba celebrated in the month of Chaitra by Gond community, includes the sacrifice of pigs and fowls. These offerings to the divine is a bid to ensure the successful germination of seeds and the prosperity of the crops and invoking divine favour for a bountiful

harvest. The Auwal, or Mother Goddess, is also venerated before the sowing of new millets, seeking her blessings for fertility (Garada 64).

The Kandha (Konds/Khonds/Kandhs) community's Ghanta Parab and Chait Parab, feature elaborate rituals and communal gatherings. Festivals such as Meriah or Kedu (modern adaptation) is observed by the Kandha tribal people in hilly area of Odisha (like Koraput, Kandhamal, Kalahandi and Rayagada) (Rath 80). The festival is celebrated by offerings sacrifice to appease the Earth Goddess (Nayak 276-277). The Kutia Kandha tribe observe the ecological ritual of 'Dakina' to ensure bountiful harvest and to preserve the community's cultivation. The tribal regions of districts such as Koraput and Mayurbhanj, 'Mandia Rani' is honoured as an agricultural deity and finger millet plays a crucial role in this ritual. 'Bihan Puja' is observed as the seed-blessing ceremony by invoking the deities before sowing. Saora tribes celebrate 'Barusim' in Rayagada and Gajapati districts of Odisha by conducting elaborate rituals for the prosperity of harvest and protection of their communities. The tribal population of western and northern belts of Odisha such as the Kisan, Bhuiyan, Kol, Santhal, Oraon, Bhumija and Binjhals venerated the Karam tree and the deity of fertility (Karam Devta) for prosperity and good harvest (Mohanty 148). The Munda community celebrated the Sarhul festival by offering Sal flower and celebrating the nature. The Santhal community of Sundargarh and Mayurbhanj celebrates Sohrai festival by worshipping the livestock like cows, bullocks and buffaloes for their significant contribution in agriculture. The festival is a live example of the strong bond shared between the tribals and animals and their rootedness in ancient beliefs and traditions (Patra 48).

PERFORMING ARTS

The tribal dances of Odisha serve as vivid expressions of celebration, storytelling, and ritual worship. Ghumura dance, celebrated by the Kondh and Gond tribes, involves dynamic movements, rhythmic drumming, and acrobatics. It honours warriors and spirits, symbolizing the strength and valor of their ancestors (Majhi 92). The Chhau dance performed particularly among the Santal and Kondh tribes is a fusion of martial arts, acrobatics, and storytelling, it features dancers adorned with intricate masks representing deities, animals, and mythical figures (Mohanta 27). Equally vibrant is the Dalkhai dance, performed by the Saora tribes, a joyous expression often seen during the harvest season as an offering of gratitude and celebration (Majhi 91). Their dance is inseparably linked to their rituals and festivals, offering a reflection of their communal spirit, collective consciousness, and social awareness.

The music of the Santal and Munda tribes is characterized by the evocative sounds of the madal (drum) and the bansi (flute), which produce melodies that forge a deep connection with nature and the spirit world. The Kondh tribe also employs the dhol, nagara, and bamboo flute, to accompany their rituals and dances. Crafted from local materials, these instruments produce sounds that resonate harmoniously with the earth itself. Wind instruments like the pippa, made from bamboo, are also integral to their musical tradition (Das 2). These instruments transcend mere performance; and believed to possess spiritual power, often invoked to receive blessings from ancestors or deities during ceremonial rites. In this way, their performances become a mirror of their cultural identity, a narrative that speaks to the essence of the indigenous peoples of Odisha.

APPARELS AND ADORNMENTS

The tribals attires and adornments like jewellery possess a distinctive yet defining characteristics. Tribal attires and accessories exhibit a distinct and defining characteristics and bear certain differences from others which are profound symbols of identity, status, and tradition, uniquely distinguishing each community. The attire of these tribes is a tapestry of intricate design, often made from locally sourced materials and that speak of their heritage. For instance, the Santal women wear simple yet graceful green and blue-check cotton saris decorated with beadwork and shells (Patnaik 20). The Kondh women wrap 'Lingar,' a handwoven cloth around the waist, complemented by jewellery made from brass, silver, and beads, symbolizing their connection to the earth. The Gond and Munda tribes, are recognized for their elaborate jewellery, like large nose ornaments and hairpins fashioned from metal and beads, signifying wealth, and social hierarchy. Traditionally, Saora men wore loin cloths, while the women adorned themselves in skirts and jewellery, embellishing their ears, noses, waists, and ankles (Dwivedi 9).

PUPPETRY AND WALL ART

The Kondh communities are well-known for a crucial art technique, 'puppetry'. They crafted the puppets from various naturally available materials such as wood, clay or cloth. The puppets are distinguishable for its harmonious movement with the tune and chants that arouses an eye-catching amalgamation of visual as well as auditory experience. The wall paintings performed by the Santhal and Saora communities are again a significant art form. The wall art combines very complex and detailed geometric patterns generally drawn on walls or ritualistic and ceremonial places (Patnaik 12). The Saora communities have accumulated acknowledgement at international level for their creative vision and impulsive compositions of music and elaborate wall art (ikons). The artistic temperament of these tribes can be witnessed in varied creative spirit such as peculiar musical tone, vibrant dance forms, cultural expressions like wall painting (anital/idital) (Garada 65). The paintings itself is a replica of sustainability as it is furnished with naturally available pigments, that often portrays deities, animals or natural environment which are regarded as possessing protective potential (Patra 49).

VI.CONCLUSION

Indigenous knowledge not only serves as a repository based on evidence rather it includes a complex and heterogenous evolving system intricately woven into the shared belief-system as well as customs of indigenous population. The knowledge system is manifested through varied expressions, such as rituals, musical and artistic expressions, and cultural ideals, guiding everyday activities (Rajendra 109). Yet, the declining traditional wisdom of Odisha stems from the expansion of modernity, threatens its conservation and dissemination. The encroachment of modern curriculum, industrial expansion initiatives, global cultural integration, and mass communication homogeneity has undervalued indigenous traditions. The declining status of indigenous wisdom further aids to its erosion (Bihari 29). The appreciation of tribal and indigenous knowledge at global level has acquired critical acclamation that further highlight its vital function for the tribal groups. This appreciation surpasses the geographical borders of the country to international organizations such as the United Nations which has recognized the knowledge of indigenous communities as a significant contribution. They associate its contribution in promoting sustainability development and empowering the marginalized groups.

Amid the realities of 21st century globalized world the indigenous knowledge of various tribes in Odisha, safeguarded by the locals has either been restricted to the small isolated groups or is gradually fading into obscurity. Thus, it has become essential to safeguard the indigenous knowledge system to ensure the continuity and transmission for posterity. Management, documentation of IK and Information professionals hold a significant role in facilitating and ensuring its continuity, preservation, and propagation.

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