



## Living Legacies: The Folk Narratives of India and its Cultural Identity

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### ABSTRACT

Folk culture in India is a vibrant mosaic of traditions, beliefs, customs, and artistic expressions deeply rooted in the daily lives of rural communities. This article examines the significance, diversity, and evolving nature of folk culture across India. It also explores the challenges faced by these traditions in the modern age and the efforts being made to preserve them. The study uses a qualitative approach to analyze the role of folk culture in shaping community identity and social cohesion.

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### Introduction

India's cultural heritage is a blend of classical and folk traditions. While classical art forms receive institutional support and recognition, folk culture often thrives in the shadows, passed down through generations orally or through practice. Folk culture includes music, dance, storytelling, rituals, and crafts that are integral to community life and local identity. Each region of India has its own distinct folk traditions reflecting the socio-economic, environmental, and spiritual lives of its people. This article seeks to explore the nuances of these traditions, their significance, and their current status in a rapidly modernizing society.

### Objectives



- To identify and document the various forms of folk culture prevalent in different regions of India.
- To understand the social and cultural significance of folk traditions.
- To analyze the challenges facing folk culture in the context of globalization and urbanization.
- To explore the efforts undertaken by individuals and institutions to preserve and promote folk culture.

### **Review of Literature**

Folk culture in India has been the subject of various scholarly works. D.N. Dhanagare's "Themes and Perspectives in Indian Sociology" provides insights into the relationship between culture and rural communities. Kapila Vatsyayan's studies on Indian arts examine how folk and classical traditions co-exist and influence each other. Komal Kothari and Rustom Bharucha have extensively documented oral traditions and performance arts in Rajasthan. These studies highlight how folk culture acts as a medium of collective memory and a tool for social communication. However, many scholars also point to the neglect and marginalization of folk culture in mainstream discourse.

### **Research Methodology:**

This study employs a qualitative methodology, relying on secondary sources such as books, journals, and articles. Ethnographic observations and interviews with folk artists and cultural practitioners have also been referenced where available. The study is interpretive in nature, aiming to understand folk culture not merely as a relic of the past but as a living and dynamic part of Indian society.

### **Folk Narratives of India:**

India, a land of diverse languages, traditions, and landscapes, is also the proud custodian of an incredibly rich and varied folk culture. Folk culture refers to the traditional customs, beliefs, practices, and artistic expressions passed through generations among the common people. Rooted in the everyday lives of rural and tribal communities, India's folk culture reflects not only the social realities but also the spiritual ethos of its people. It spans music, dance, storytelling, rituals, art, crafts, festivals, and culinary traditions. Despite the tides of modernization and globalization, folk culture continues to provide India with a distinct identity and a vibrant connection to its past. Understanding India's folk traditions is crucial to appreciating the soul of the nation.



## Historical Evolution of Folk Culture in India

The roots of India's folk culture trace back to prehistoric times when early communities used oral traditions to pass on knowledge, legends, and values. Archaeological evidence from sites like Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa shows that even ancient civilizations practiced art forms that might have folk origins, such as terracotta figures and dance postures.

During the Vedic period, while Sanskritic traditions flourished, rural populations maintained their indigenous practices, often blending religious worship with songs, dances, and storytelling. Over centuries, invasions by Persians, Greeks, Mughals, and British introduced new elements into India's cultural mix. However, folk traditions showed remarkable resilience by adapting these influences into their own styles.

Folk culture remained largely oral. Songs and epics like the Alha-Udal of Bundelkhand or the ballads of Rajasthan were memorized and performed across generations without written texts. Mythological stories, local heroes, village deities, and nature worship formed the basis of much of the folk narrative. Colonialism posed a threat by introducing modern education and centralized governance, often marginalizing local traditions. However, the nationalist movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries rekindled interest in folk culture, recognizing it as a symbol of Indian identity and resistance to colonial rule.

### Diversity of Folk Traditions Across Indian States:

The diversity of India's folk traditions mirrors its geographic and linguistic plurality. Each region has evolved its distinctive forms of folk expression, tailored to its environment, history, and social structure.

### Folk Music

**Baul Songs (Bengal):** The Bauls are mystic minstrels whose songs convey spiritual philosophy in simple language. Their music often uses traditional instruments like the ektara. **Lavani (Maharashtra):** A lively dance and music form, Lavani focuses on themes of love, valor, and socio-political commentary.

**Bihu Songs (Assam):** Sung during the Bihu festival, these songs celebrate love, fertility, and the agricultural cycle.



### **Folk Dances**

Garba (Gujarat): Performed during Navratri, Garba is a devotional dance dedicated to the Goddess Durga, involving rhythmic clapping and circular movements. Ghoomar (Rajasthan): A graceful dance traditionally performed by women wearing colorful ghagras. Yakshagana (Karnataka): A unique blend of dance, music, dialogue, costume, makeup, and stage techniques that narrate stories from Hindu epics.

### **Folk Art**

Madhubani Painting (Bihar): Characterized by intricate patterns and vibrant colors, often depicting mythology and nature. Warli Art (Maharashtra): A simple yet profound tribal art form using white paint on mud walls, illustrating daily life. Pattachitra (Odisha and Bengal): Cloth-based scroll painting with themes of mythology and folklore.

### **Festivals and Fairs**

India's folk culture is vividly expressed through festivals and fairs:

Pushkar Mela (Rajasthan): A camel fair that includes folk performances, competitions, and trading. Hornbill Festival (Nagaland): A showcase of the diverse cultural heritage of Nagaland's tribes. Theyyam (Kerala): A ritualistic dance form blending theater, music, and dance to embody deities. The climate, landscape, and history of a region deeply influence its folk traditions, ensuring that no two areas have identical expressions.

### **Folk Culture as a Reflection of Social Identity and Collective Memory**

Folk culture is not merely about entertainment or aesthetic value; it is a living expression of a community's identity, beliefs, struggles, and aspirations. It acts as a repository of collective memory, preserving histories often absent from official records.

### **Celebrating Heroism and Resistance**

Through ballads and folklore, communities honor heroes who fought oppression or protected their lands. Examples include the ballads of Rani Durgavati in Central India and Pabuji in Rajasthan. Tribal epics like those of the Santhal and Bhil communities recount tales of resistance against exploitation and injustice. Women are often the primary carriers of folk traditions. Folk songs sung during childbirth, weddings, harvests, and festivals are usually led by women. These songs offer insights into women's views on family, society, and even gender inequalities.



Villages across India often worship local deities distinct from mainstream Hindu gods. These deities, like Khandoba in Maharashtra or Mariamman in Tamil Nadu, are central to folk rituals, festivals, and myths, reflecting the localized spiritual needs of communities.

### **Folk Narratives and Social Commentary**

Many folk stories contain social critiques, disguised within humor or allegory. Trickster tales like those of Birbal or Tenali Rama use wit to expose corruption, injustice, and societal hypocrisies.

Thus, folk culture acts both as a mirror and a vehicle for social cohesion, critique, and resilience.

### **Impact of Globalization and the threat of Homogenization**

Globalization, urbanization, and mass media have led to the erosion of traditional lifestyles. Younger generations often migrate to cities, losing touch with village customs. The allure of global popular culture diminishes the status of local traditions, making them appear outdated or irrelevant. Mass production and commercialization often dilute the uniqueness of folk art forms. For instance, Madhubani paintings are sometimes mass-produced for tourist markets, losing the intricate symbolism and authenticity that characterized traditional works. Recognizing the importance of folk traditions, various government schemes and NGOs work towards their revival. The Sangeet Natak Akademi and state cultural departments organize festivals, exhibitions, and documentation projects to promote folk art forms.

Efforts like “Shilp Guru” awards recognize master craftsmen, while initiatives like “Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat” encourage cultural exchanges between states. Television shows, films, and social media platforms have brought new visibility to folk artists. Folk fusion music, where traditional tunes blend with contemporary styles, has garnered popularity among the youth. Tourism has also opened up new markets for folk performances and handicrafts. However, sustainable revival requires genuine



engagement, not mere commodification. Documentation, education, and ensuring dignified livelihoods for folk artists are crucial.

Innovative projects across India are helping to adapt folk culture to contemporary contexts:

- Urban street performances by folk artists.
- Inclusion of folk tales in children's literature and animations.
- Modern theater productions inspired by traditional folk narratives.

Through such dynamic adaptations, folk culture can survive and thrive even in a rapidly changing world.

## Conclusion

Folk culture forms the soul of India's diverse cultural landscape. It captures the dreams, struggles, joys, and wisdom of ordinary people across centuries. Far from being relics of the past, folk traditions are living, breathing expressions of identity and creativity. In a world increasingly homogenized by technology and commerce, India's folk culture offers a powerful reminder of the beauty and necessity of diversity. Preserving these traditions is not merely about safeguarding heritage; it is about sustaining the collective imagination and resilience of communities. As India strides into the future, it must embrace modernization without severing the living roots of its folk traditions. A culturally rich India must continue to celebrate and nurture the treasures of its folk heritage for generations to come.

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