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Celebrating Festivals, Preserving Skills: The Case Study of the Gowli Tribe

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ABSTRACT

India's cultural diversity is enriched by its indigenous communities, including the Gowli tribe, renowned for its deep-rooted pastoral traditions and expertise in dairy farming. Historically, the Gowlis have sustained their livelihoods through traditional cattle rearing and oral storytelling. Festivals such as Shilongan and Vijayadashami play a vital role in preserving their heritage, reinforcing their spiritual connection with cattle and nature. However, modernization and urbanization pose significant challenges to their traditional way of life, leading to a decline in indigenous knowledge, economic instability, and cultural erosion. The shift to urban livelihoods, shrinking grazing lands, and the rise of commercial dairy industries have marginalised the Gowlis' traditional dairy farming practices. By integrating indigenous knowledge with contemporary advancements, the Gowlis can retain their traditional practices while benefiting from modern opportunities. This study highlights the need for inclusive development policies that empower indigenous communities while safeguarding their unique traditions. Without active preservation efforts, the invaluable knowledge of the Gowli tribe risks fading into obscurity, underscoring the importance of recognising and integrating indigenous wisdom into India's broader knowledge systems.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge; Tradition; Cultural Preservation; Modernization

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INTRODUCTION

India's rich cultural tapestry is woven from diverse castes, religions, languages, cuisines, arts, and philosophical beliefs. The country is home to numerous indigenous tribes with a distinct cultural identity, such as the Todas of the Nilgiris, the Bhils of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, and the Nagas of the Northeast. These communities proudly celebrate their heritage through vibrant festivals, traditional folk dances, and cultural events. Moreover, sustainable practices like agriculture, hunting, and gathering reflect their intimate connection with nature. As Habbi et al. (2024) note, the unique languages, dialects, and artistic expressions of these tribes play a crucial role in preserving their oral traditions and folklore.

India's tribal communities harbour a profound spiritual connection with nature, often expressed through animist beliefs and reverence for natural elements like forests, rivers, and mountains. Their diverse spiritual practices are characterized by a rich pantheon of deities and spirits. As Purkayastha (2016) observes, India's tribes exhibit striking diversity, ranging from isolated communities that have preserved traditional ways to those that have undergone significant cultural transformations. The Indian Constitution recognizes and safeguards the rights of tribal communities, ensuring the preservation of their unique identity, culture, and self-governance. Nevertheless, these communities have endured centuries of marginalization, with historical injustices exacerbated by colonial-era exploitation and forced displacement.

As Gupta (2023) observes, the post-independence era has seen persistent tension between development initiatives and tribal rights, threatening the very identity, autonomy, and livelihood of these communities. While modernity and urbanization offer opportunities for development and integration, they also pose significant challenges to the cultural and social identities of tribal communities, forcing a delicate balance between progress and preservation. Chavan (2024) argues that modernization and urbanization have catalyzed the erosion of tribal customs and traditions, triggering a profound identity crisis within India's indigenous communities.

Narratives and stories are woven into the fabric of Indian festivals, serving as multifaceted tools that educate, entertain, and cater to diverse needs, while addressing pedagogical challenges. Oral traditions, encompassing folk tales, stories, and songs, are intricately embedded in religious rituals and festivals, preserving cultural heritage and collective wisdom (Thounaojam et al., 2018). Effective storytelling authenticates and enriches local festivals, evoking positive emotions and ensuring their enduring success.

Storytelling and oral narratives play a vital role in infusing local festivals with authenticity and emotional resonance. In urban contexts, cultural festivals serve as dynamic bridges, connecting people and places while navigating complex social, economic, and political landscapes (Finkel & Platt, 2020). Conversely, rural festivals foster unity, transcending interpersonal divisions. Moreover, urban festivals have the power to shape positive

attitudes among elite audiences, promoting dialogue, coexistence, and social cohesion (Ancín, 2013).

Karnataka's tribal landscape is marked by striking diversity, encompassing both indigenous and migrated communities with a rich historical legacy. Native tribes, such as the Soliga, Jenukuruba, Hakki Pikki, Kadu Kuruba, Gond, and Gowli, have traditionally inhabited forest regions, preserving distinct cultural identities despite external influences. This article explores the impact of modernization and urbanization on the traditional dairy farming practices and skills of the Gowli tribe, highlighting the importance of preserving their indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Research highlights the profound impact of festivals and community events on fostering community cohesion, cultural identity, and economic growth (Jeon et al., 2020). While sharing commonalities, each festival possesses unique characteristics that set it apart (Van Vliet, 2019). These events evoke powerful emotional responses, driving attendee satisfaction, psychological commitment, and ultimately, enhanced well-being and loyalty (Abbasian, 2022).

Modernization often threatens the integrity of indigenous cultures, leading to language erosion, loss of traditional practices, and diminished cultural identities. Nevertheless, many communities exhibit resilience through cultural hybridization and strategic acceptance of technology, seeking to preserve their cultural heritage amidst the complications of globalization (Alam, 2025).

The impact of modernization and urbanization on Indian tribes is a complex, multifaceted issue, necessitating a nuanced understanding of its far-reaching consequences. Research has consistently shown that urbanization has led to the erosion of traditional ways of life, cultural heritage, and social structures of Indian tribes (Mitra, S., & Abhinaya, V., n.d.).

This study investigates the challenges faced by tribal communities in preserving their cultural heritage in the face of rapid industrialization and modernization in Rourkela. Despite the benefits of progress, tribal populations have experienced displacement, dislocation, and cultural erosion, leading to a growing disconnect between tribal youths and their cultural roots. This research explores the hypothesis that tribal cultures possess a unique historicity, deserving of respect, understanding, and preservation (Ekka, 2013). Despite its numerous benefits and advancements, modernity has had a profound impact on tribal communities, inducing a sense of restlessness and identity crisis (Longchar, 2012)

Despite the pressures of modernization, cultural exchange, and market forces, traditional tribal communities continue to uphold certain enduring beliefs, values, norms, and institutional mechanisms that have been passed down through generations (Kala, 2011).

According to Malyadri (2012), a significant challenge lies in the fact that while tribes recognize the influence of modernization and the need for adaptation, they are hesitant to initiate reforms that would improve their educational outcomes and economic well-being.

Festivals play a pivotal role in shaping individual and collective identities, addressing the fundamental human need for belonging (Jaeger & Mykletun, 2013). As vibrant expressions of distinct religious communities, festivals foster collaboration, interfaith dialogue, and social cohesion among diverse groups, promoting a culture of mutual understanding and respect (Andersen, 2019).

Community celebrations function as potent symbolic rituals, cultivating a sense of belonging, facilitating cultural exploration, and socializing individuals into community norms (Smith-Shank, 2002). By reflecting and reinforcing community values, interests, and aspirations, these celebrations foster a shared sense of purpose, unity, and cohesion among diverse community members (Derrett, 2003).

India boasts a kaleidoscopic cultural landscape, woven from vibrant folk traditions, literature, and art forms, inviting discovery and immersion. Embodied in guardian folk deities, folktales, and games is a rich cultural heritage that resonates deeply (Angadi, 2018). Rangoli art, with its symbolic language, serves as a powerful medium for warding off negativity and representing universal energies. As a traditional women's art form, Rangoli exemplifies collective wisdom, spontaneity, and simplicity, conveying life's philosophy through captivating visual storytelling (Tadvalkar, 2015).

Traditional myths and folktales are crucial in socializing children, imparting fundamental values, and shaping cultural norms. Moreover, institutionalized structures like the Bachelors' House, found among various tribes, offer a holistic education in social responsibilities, communal activities, artistic expression, and reproductive health, fostering well-rounded individuals (Das, 1962).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a comprehensive literature review to explore the significance of skills and festivals in Indian culture, with a specific focus on the hitherto understudied Gowli tribe. A thorough examination of existing literature was conducted, incorporating academic journals, research articles, newspapers, books, YouTube videos, and reputable online sources. This thorough review of literature enabled the identification of key findings on how the Gowli tribe preserves its traditional skills and practices across generations through festivals and other cultural events. The analysis revealed the profound impact of modernization and urbanization on the tribe's cultural landscape, highlighting the gradual shift in their traditional practices and skills over time, as well as how modernization/technology contributed to the Gowli tribe's improvement.

TRACING THE ORIGINS OF THE GOWLI TRIBE

The Gowli tribe is predominantly located in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Goa, and Madhya Pradesh, the Gowli tribe has a distinct cultural identity. The term "Gowli" originates from the Sanskrit word "Gow" or "Gou," meaning cow. As noted in Prachi's 2016 study, "Gowli tribe: Herders of Dandeli," the Gowli community in Dandeli takes pride in its rich cultural heritage, rooted in its Yadava origins. This heritage is intertwined with the legend of Lord Krishna. A significant aspect of Gowli culture is their enthusiastic celebration of Vijayadashami, a major Indian festival honouring the victory of good over evil.

The Gowli tribe has a significant presence in northern and central Karnataka. They predominantly inhabit the Western Ghats region, spanning North Kanara, Shimoga, and Chikmagalur districts, surrounded by lush deciduous forests and perennial streams (Gadgil & Malhotra, 1982).

The Gowlis' rich cultural heritage is showcased through vibrant festivals like Gopalaka and harvest celebrations, which seamlessly blend dance, music, and spirituality. Intergenerational storytelling and folk songs serve as vital repositories of their history, values, and traditional knowledge, underscoring the significance of preserving their cultural identity.

Indigenous Knowledge of Dairy Farming among the Gowli

The Gowli tribe, with a legacy of pastoralism and cattle herding, has an intrinsic bond with dairy farming, which forms the cornerstone of their livelihood and cultural identity. For generations, they have employed indigenous methods of cattle rearing, milking, and dairy production, significantly contributing to India's traditional dairy industry. The Gowlis ensure high-quality milk production through sustainable practices, including natural grazing methods, herbal treatments, and organic feed supplements. Their traditional dairy products, such as curd, ghee, and buttermilk, are prized for their nutritional and medicinal properties, aligning with Ayurvedic principles. Their symbiotic relationship with cattle reflects a harmonious coexistence with nature, making them an integral part of India's pastoral heritage and dairy ecosystem.

The Gowli tribe's traditional dairy management practices and cultural values are safeguarded through a rich oral tradition, which serves as a vital conduit for passing knowledge to succeeding generations. Oral narratives weave together stories of ancestral roots, moral values, and the intricate relationships between humans, animals, and nature. Folk songs, stories, and proverbs play a pivotal role in reinforcing the tribe's identity, while songs and chants sung during cattle grazing or community gatherings reflect their profound bond with their livestock and land. The Gowlis observe various rituals and festivals, including cattle worship, seasonal cycles, and agrarian celebrations, which are deeply ingrained in their cultural heritage.

This tribe relies heavily on oral tradition as their primary means of knowledge transmission and learning. This ancient practice also underpins their traditional dispute-resolution mechanisms and community governance, which are guided by orally transmitted wisdom and customary laws. Oral tradition enables the Gowlis to dynamically adapt their knowledge in response to shifting environmental and social contexts. The retelling of myths, folklore, and oral narratives serves as a vital tool for maintaining group solidarity and identity. These stories and songs possess transformative power, shaping cultural values and social norms. However, when these traditions are no longer passed down, the associated knowledge and information are lost, leaving communities disconnected from their heritage. Oral traditions provide a vital link between past and present, offering insights into cultural and social orders. By sharing stories, communities convey social expectations and values, while also imparting practical knowledge on survival and sustenance, such as understanding seasonal changes and animal behavior (Mahapatra, 1993).

Their stories evolve organically, incorporating fresh experiences while preserving core wisdom, thereby ensuring the continuity of their cultural heritage. This adaptive approach allows the tribe to remain resilient and connected to their ancestral traditions. Through this ancient practice, they share stories, legends, and historical accounts, which are meticulously preserved and passed down through elders, community leaders, and spiritual guides.

Elders transmit cultural knowledge, including sacred prayers and ceremonial practices, to younger generations through oral tradition, preserving their cultural legacy.

Role of the festival:

Every caste or tribe has customs, rituals, practices, and festivals. These elements make a vibrant caste or tribe vibrant. Shilongan is one such instance in the Gowli tribe. The Gowli tribe has been celebrating different festivals i.e. Holi, Janmashtami, Deepavali, Vijayadashami etc. The most significant of these festivals are Holi and Silongan, which were held to pass down knowledge to future generations.

The Shilongan festival is held between Deepavali and Vijayadashami (Dassara), and it demonstrates the tribe's dedication to preserving their cultural heritage through oral tradition. During this lively celebration, the Gowlis recite, sing traditional songs, and perform rituals that honour their rich cultural heritage. During the Shilongan festival, they perform drama, dance, and songs; specifically, through drama or dance, they pass messages to the next generation about how to live, learn about their community's rich culture, and deal with problems. In this sense, their cultural identity is deeply rooted in their spiritual connection to cattle and nature, as evidenced by festivals such as Shilongan, Govardhan Puja, and Vijayadashami. Oral traditions, folk songs, and storytelling all play an important role in passing down this knowledge to future generations.

It demonstrates that the festivals play a pivotal role in preserving and transmitting knowledge from one generation to another. However, we failed to notice these elements and instead focused solely on superficial aspects like dance as entertainment, food, and clothing as culture, and ways of dressing, etc. Many of us completely overlooked their significance and how to interpret those actions.

IMPACT OF MODERNISATION ON THE GOWLI TRIBE

Unlocking Opportunities: Best Practices for Advancement through Modernisation

The modernization process has had a multifaceted impact on the Gowli tribe, similar to many indigenous groups worldwide. While it has introduced various challenges, there are also several key areas where the tribe has likely benefited from modernization. Specifically, modernization has enhanced access to essential services such as healthcare and education, thereby improving the overall quality of life for the Gowlis. Additionally, modern technologies have opened up new avenues for economic empowerment, enabling the tribe to engage in more lucrative livelihood activities and expand their market reach.

Access to Education: The advent of modernization has brought about a significant shift in the educational landscape of the Gowli tribe. With increased access to formal education, the Gowlis have been able to send their children to schools and colleges, thereby equipping them with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate the complexities of modern society. This newfound access to education has empowered the younger generation of Gowlis to integrate with the broader society, while still preserving their unique cultural identity and traditional practices. As a result, the Gowli tribe is now better positioned to participate in the economic, social, and political mainstream, without sacrificing their distinct cultural heritage. By striking a balance between modernization and cultural preservation, the Gowlis are paving the way for a brighter future, one that honors their rich traditions while embracing the opportunities of the modern world.

Healthcare Improvements: The influx of modernization has yielded a profound impact on the healthcare landscape of the Gowli community, leading to a new era of improved health outcomes and enhanced well-being. The increased accessibility of modern medical facilities, coupled with comprehensive health education and widespread vaccination programs, has significantly contributed to a notable reduction in mortality rates and a substantial increase in life expectancy among the Gowli people.

As a result, the Gowlis are now better equipped to combat diseases that previously plagued their community, such as malaria, tuberculosis, and water-borne illnesses. The integration of modern healthcare practices has also led to improved maternal and child health, reduced infant mortality rates, and enhanced management of chronic diseases. Furthermore, the Gowlis now have greater access to specialized medical care, diagnostic services, and lifesaving treatments, which has dramatically improved their overall quality of life.

Infrastructure Development: The onset of modernization has triggered a wave of infrastructural developments, transforming the lives of indigenous communities like the Gowli tribe. The construction of roads, for instance, has bridged the gap between remote villages and urban centers, facilitating easier access to markets, essential services, and economic opportunities. This, in turn, has enabled the Gowlis to expand their trade networks, increase their income, and enhance their overall standard of living.

Furthermore, the introduction of electricity has transformed daily life for the Gowli people by providing them with a dependable source of power for lighting, heating, and communication, and access to clean drinking water, another critical component of modernization, has significantly improved the health and well-being of the Gowli community. With the installation of piped water supply systems, borewells, and water purification plants, the Gowlis are now less reliant on contaminated water sources, reducing the incidence of water-borne diseases and improving their overall quality of life.

Cultural Preservation and Promotion: Modernization has bridged the gap between indigenous communities, including the Gowli tribe, and the global village. The proliferation of technology, social media, and cultural exchange programs has empowered the Gowlis to share their rich cultural heritage with a broader audience, promoting cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.

Through digital platforms, the Gowlis can now showcase their traditional practices, such as their vibrant textiles, intricate handicrafts, and enchanting folk music. Social media has become a powerful tool for the Gowlis to connect with a global community, share their stories, and preserve their linguistic heritage. Cultural exchange programs have also facilitated people-to-people diplomacy, enabling the Gowlis to engage in meaningful dialogue with other indigenous communities and foster international collaborations. This increased global connectivity has not only helped preserve the Gowli's cultural identity but also provided opportunities for economic empowerment. By leveraging e-commerce platforms and digital marketplaces, the Gowlis can now sell their traditional handicrafts and products to a global customer base, generating income and promoting sustainable livelihoods.

Moreover, this integration into the global community has also enabled the Gowlis to access knowledge, resources, and expertise that can aid in their development and self-determination. By embracing modernization while preserving their cultural heritage, the Gowli tribe is charting a path towards a brighter, more empowered future.

Legal Protection and Advocacy: Modernization, especially through government policies, has led to better legal frameworks that protect indigenous rights. For the Gowli tribe, this might mean legal recognition, protection of their land rights, and advocacy for their interests at local or national levels.

While modernization can bring both positive and negative consequences, these areas represent some of the key benefits that the Gowli tribe could experience as a result of changes in the broader societal context.

Unintended Consequences: The Dark Side of Modernisation

The Gowli tribe is facing a steady erosion of its traditional skills, largely due to the confluence of social, economic, and environmental factors. The gradual shift away from traditional dairy management practices, which were once the cornerstone of their identity, has led to a decline in the intergenerational transmission of knowledge.

- Rapid urbanization has led to the widespread conversion of forests and open grazing lands into agricultural fields, industries, and urban settlements, severely limiting the space available for traditional cattle rearing. As a result, the Gowli tribe's centuries-old nomadic and semi-nomadic lifestyle is under threat. Legal restrictions on forest grazing and challenges related to land ownership have further exacerbated the issue, forcing many Gowli families to abandon their traditional way of life and adapt to more sedentary and often less sustainable livelihoods.
- The allure of better economic opportunities is driving younger generations of Gowlis away from their ancestral dairy farming practices. Many are opting for urban jobs, government services, and small businesses, which are perceived as more lucrative and less labour-intensive. As a result, the traditional dairy skills that were once passed down orally through generations are fading. The decline of interest in dairy farming is further exacerbated by increasing access to education, which is prompting many young Gowli to migrate to cities in search of more promising livelihoods.
- The proliferation of commercial dairy farming has significantly altered the dairy landscape, marginalizing small-scale traditional dairy farmers like the Gowlis. Large-scale dairy industries and cooperative milk societies, such as KMF's Nandini in Karnataka, have come to dominate milk production, transferring traditional dairy farmers to a peripheral role. The rise of these large dairy corporations has led to unfair pricing mechanisms and intense competition, rendering traditional dairy farming increasingly unviable and threatening the livelihoods of communities like the Gowlis.
- The increasing reliance on technology in modern dairy farming has led to a significant departure from the traditional practices of the Gowli community. Artificial fertilization, processed cattle feed, and mechanized milking have replaced the community's hands-on approach, which was deeply rooted in their cultural heritage. Furthermore, the adoption of modern veterinary care has supplanted the Gowlis' traditional use of herbal medicine and indigenous

veterinary techniques, resulting in a decline in this unique knowledge and a loss of cultural identity.

Shortly, The Gowli tribe's traditional dairy management skills are at risk of extinction due to modernization and urbanization, exacerbated by the decline of native practices with the rise of milk-cooperative societies. The tribe faces numerous challenges, including economic instability, cultural dilution, and loss of heritage, as younger generations show disinterest in traditional ways. Key challenges include sustaining cattle rearing amidst shrinking grazing lands and economic hardships. To address these concerns, it's essential to understand the tribe's perspectives and strike a balance between cultural preservation and modern opportunities.

KNOWLEDGE DIVERSITY: MAINSTREAM AND INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES

The Gowli tribe's encounter with modernization and urbanization has yielded a multifaceted outcome, marked by both promise and adversity. On one hand, modernization has introduced avenues for improved education, healthcare, and economic empowerment, enabling the Gowlis to access better services and participate in the global economy. On the other hand, the same forces have also threatened the tribe's cultural identity, traditional practices, and social fabric, as they confront the challenges of urbanization, land displacement, and cultural homogenization.

- Modernization and technology have been hitting the Gowli tribe; hence, it is not fair to conclude that the cultural and traditional heritage of the Gowli tribe has been moving towards disappearing. Of course, many positive changes are also occurring, and they undoubtedly require the benefits of modernization. Modernization is bringing the Gowli tribe into the mainstream, and they are being noticed across India. They can now access formal education, and modernization has opened up new job opportunities. That is not to say that the Gowli people are completely settled or part of the mainstream; however, they require significant support. However, modernization and urbanization pose a serious threat to the Gowlis' traditional skills. The transition from traditional livelihoods to wage labor or migratory work has resulted in economic instability, while the loss of traditional knowledge jeopardizes their distinct customs, rituals, and oral traditions. Because of their extensive Indigenous knowledge, the Gowlis' skills must be preserved. Their ancestral knowledge includes expertise in cattle breeding, dairy farming, and natural resource management. The Gowlis use herbal remedies for human and animal health, graze sustainably, and migrate according to seasonal patterns based on climate and pasture knowledge.
- The tribe's cultural identity, which is inextricably linked to their traditional practices, is also under threat; traditional dairy farming, expertise in milk

products, traditional education of identifying medicinal herbs, and caring for oxen, cows, and so on, are all under threat as a result of modernization, with youths diverting from traditional skills to modernity. Diversion is not a bad thing, the Gowli tribe must be exposed to the modern/urban world, and through this channel, and they come under the mainstream while also preserving their cultural and traditional knowledge. Otherwise, traditional methods and knowledge passed down from generation to generation will certainly disappear after a few years. On this note, we have to ask ourselves what the Gowli tribe can contribute to Indian knowledge if it is not actively preserved.

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