



Living Traditions: Fairs and Festivals as Vessels of India's Cultural Continuity

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ABSTRACT

India's cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, stands as a testament to its historical depth and civilizational continuity. Fairs and festivals, deeply embedded in the socio-cultural fabric of the nation, play a pivotal role in preserving and promoting this heritage. These celebrations transcend caste, creed, and regional boundaries, fostering communal harmony, social cohesion, and a shared sense of identity. Historically, they have also served as platforms for socio-political mobilization, as evidenced by Lokmanya Tilak's strategic use of public festivals like Ganesh Chaturthi and the Shivaji Utsav during the Indian independence movement. Today, festivals such as Diwali, Holi, Baisakhi, Pongal, Kumbh Mela, and regional fairs like the Camel Fair and Jagannath Yatra continue to function not only as cultural expressions but also as significant drivers of local economies and tourism. This study critically examines the role of fairs and festivals in promoting national identity, stimulating economic activity, and safeguarding India's intangible cultural heritage. Through a multidisciplinary lens, it further explores sustainable strategies for cultural preservation to ensure the resilience and continuity of India's diverse traditions in the face of globalization and modernization.

Keywords: Diversity, Festivals, Heritage, Intangible, Preservation, Sustainable.

1. INTRODUCTION

India has always been a culturally rich nation known for its rich cultural heritage. It is a culturally diverse state with a dynamic structure of society, and the people follow different traditions, faiths, rituals, and mythologies. Irrespective of their religions, they have contributed a lot to the growth and progress of the nation and left a glorious cultural heritage for us in the form of tangible and intangible assets. Fairs and festivals celebrated for centuries are a significant part of intangible heritage, connected with the social and religious lives of the people, and they have a deep impact on society and culture. All the festivals are mainly socio-religious in nature and have been serving to create an atmosphere of joy and happiness among the people for a long time. A number of fairs and festivals are being observed every year in different ways at different places, which add the local flavor of distinct cultures and respective sites. Fairs and festivals give people a break from their day-to-day routine, and they celebrate them with great enthusiasm

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

1. To examine the role of fairs and festivals in shaping and reinforcing India's cultural identity by fostering social cohesion, communal participation, and intergenerational transmission of traditions.
2. To assess fairs and festivals as vital tools for promoting intangible cultural heritage and evaluate their potential as economic drivers through tourism, local enterprise, and heritage-based development.

3. METHODOLOGY FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, focusing on the socio-cultural dimensions of fairs and festivals in India. The analysis is grounded in a comprehensive review of contemporary literature, including scholarly books,

journal articles, cultural reports, and archival materials. Additionally, the researcher employed participant observation as a key method by engaging directly in various festivals such as Ratha Yatra, Diwali, Eid, and Jagannath Yatra, among others. These immersive experiences provided firsthand insights into the lived cultural expressions, communal interactions, and intangible heritage values associated with the celebrations. The study emphasizes interpretation and thematic analysis to explore how these events contribute to cultural identity formation and function as tools for heritage preservation and economic activity.

3.1 Meaning of Fairs and Festivals

Different scholars have described the fairs and festivals in their own way. The word fair is derived from the Latin word "feriae," which means days of holiday, rest, and feasting.

According to the Bible, *"fairs were considered a commercial place for merchants to buy and sell their goods."* In India, fairs are mainly associated with cultural, religious, agricultural, commercial, and other amusement activities. People come together and celebrate the fair in a peaceful manner. People hailing from different areas buy and sell goods, interact with each other, and share their languages, cultures, and knowledge. In the hills, numerous small fairs are being organized by the tribal people at the local temples called "the Jaggar or the Jagran," which are associated with local Devis and Devtas (gods and goddesses). People celebrate these Fairs with devotion and dedication, perform many rituals, offer prayers, precious goods, and sacrifice animals to get their wishes fulfilled. In these fairs, people sing and dance and are filled with exhilaration. Such occasions serve as a retreat for them from the hectic schedules of their lives.

Meaning of Festival: Festival is not much different from the word fair. Several words have been used to describe the word festival, such as Fest, Carnival, Fiesta, etc.

The origin of the word festival can be traced to the Latin word 'Fiesta' which means religious holiday'. Festivals have been variously defined as: According to Webster's College Dictionary, festivals mean *"times of celebration marked by special observances."* The Oxford Dictionary has also defined the word festival as *"a series of performances of music, plays, films, etc. usually organized in the same place once a year; a series of public events connected with a particular activity or idea."* Moreover, Collins Dictionary defines the word festival as *"a day or time of the year when people have a holiday from work and celebrate some special event, often a religious event."* On the basis of the above definitions and being a keen observer of many fairs and festivals, it can be said that a festival is the occasion where people come together to share love, peace, and happiness and celebrate their precious moments together at a particular destination to fill their lives with joy and entertainment. Most of the Hindu festivals are fixed according to the Lunar-Solar months; the Lunar days are called 'Tithi' and the Solar days are called 'Vara'; Var means 'day' such as Soma, Mangla, Buddha, Brishpati, Shukra, Shani, and Ravi. Each day has sacred importance in Hinduism.

3.2 Popular festivals in India

3.2.1 Basant Panchami is a vibrant seasonal festival celebrated primarily in northern India, marking the arrival of spring. It falls on the fifth day of the Magh month (January), symbolizing the onset of the season. The festival is dedicated to Goddess Saraswati, and on this auspicious day, people engage in worship and seek blessings from the goddess. It is considered the birthday of Goddess Saraswati, the deity of knowledge, arts, and wisdom.

3.2.2 Magh Bihu, Bhogali Bihu, or Maghar Domahi, is a prominent and festive celebration observed in the northeastern Indian state of Assam. The harvest festival is commemorated with immense excitement and customary zeal, signifying the culmination of the harvesting period. A bonfire, referred to as Meji, is ignited as a ceremonial act of concluding and offering prayers to the deity associated with fire. Magh Bihu, originating from the agrarian traditions of Assam, is a festival that not only commemorates the bountiful harvest but also symbolizes the cultural legacy and solidarity of the community. The Magh Bihu festival developed as a commemoration of the agricultural cycle's culmination, specifically the end of the harvest season. The celebration has its origins in the era of the Ahom monarchs, who governed the area and promoted agriculture as a vital component of the state's economy. It is conjectured by scholars that the practice of Bihu can be traced back to ancient times, during which individuals performed fire rituals in order to enhance agricultural yields. The practice of igniting a bonfire at Uruka and incinerating Meji can be attributed to the fire veneration habit of the agricultural community. The celebration

originates from the customs and rituals observed by the native populations of Assam. At the event, people show their appreciation to the deities for a plentiful harvest and seek favors for the future agricultural cycle.

3.2.3 Holi, known as the festival of color, is a widely celebrated event that takes place across the entire country around the full moon of the Phalgun month, which falls between February and March. The day encompasses the Holika Dehan ritual, during which individuals ignite effigies as a symbolic representation of the victory of righteousness over wickedness. The atmosphere is teeming with vivid hues as individuals partake in exuberant festivities, reciting sacred chants, and embracing the essence of harmony. Holi is marked by vibrant and vivid festivities. Individuals congregate in unobstructed areas, roadways, and communal plazas, equipped with desiccated pigments and aqueous projectiles such as balloons or firearms. The ambiance is replete with mirth, melodies, and rhythmic movements. Individuals adorn one another's faces with vivid hues, engage in joyful acts of dousing each other with colored water, and exchange greetings and confections.

3.3.4 Losar Festival Tibet is the location where ancient rituals are performed, depicting the perpetual conflict between good and evil. Additionally, it signifies the commencement of the Ladakhi New Year. Furthermore, Arunachal Pradesh and its neighboring states commemorate festivals such as Chalo, Pongutu, and Loku, each holding its own distinct importance. Bohag Bihu, the most significant event in Assam, marks the beginning of the New Year and the agricultural cycle. Offerings made at the domestic shrine come after prayers at the Tawang Monastery during the festival. During the evening, a customary noodle soup known as guthuk is produced. This soup consists of dumplings crafted from a mixture of flour and water, which are then filled with nine distinct fortune symbols. It is believed that consuming these dumplings will decide an individual's fate for the upcoming year. Gyalpo Losar, the second day of the festival, is exclusively dedicated to the King. During this occasion, individuals pay visits to their acquaintances and engage in the customary Aji Lhamu mask dance. They also engage in the exchange of pleasantries and express well-wishes to each other by saying 'tashi delek', which is a phrase that conveys the meaning of 'good luck'. At nightfall, individuals ignite torches with the idea that it will repel malevolent entities from their dwellings. During the concluding day of the Losar festival, individuals visit the nearby monastery to engage in prayer. Additionally, they give charitable contributions of food and clothing, raise flags, create sculptures out of butter, and burn juniper leaves.

3.3.5 Chath Puja, or Dala Pujan, is also referred to as an important event in Bihar. Chhath Puja is a rigorous and devout four-day religious rite. On the initial day of the Chhath Puja, participants partake in ritualistic bathing in a sacred river or any other body of water. Individuals frequently transport the water from the Ganges River to their residences for the purpose of conducting certain religious ceremonies and observances. On this day, houses undergo a meticulous cleaning process. On the second day of Chhath, also called Kharna, followers fast throughout the day and break their fast in the late evening after worshipping Mother Earth. The offerings made to the deity consist of rice pudding (kheer) and fruits, which are dispersed among relatives and friends. On the third day of Chhath, devotees dedicate their time to preparing the prasad (offerings) for the evening ritual, which is also referred to as Sanjhiya Arghya. During the evening, a multitude of devotees congregate along the riverbanks to present offerings (Arghya) to the descending sun. The folk songs are performed to showcase the cultural and historical heritage of Bihar. Kosi is a vibrant event that takes place in the evening on the third day. The canopy is constructed of sugarcane sticks, and illuminated clay lamps are positioned within it, beside baskets containing prasad. During the concluding day of Chhath, individuals gather with their relatives and companions at the riverbanks prior to day break to present offerings (Arghya) to the ascending sun. Following this ceremonial practice, followers conclude their period of fasting and give Prasad, a religious offering, to their neighbors and family.

3.3.6 Diwali, the festival of lights, signifies the homecoming of Lord Rama to Ayodhya following a 14-year period of banishment. Individuals venerate Goddess Laxmi and Lord Ganesha, adorn their residences with illuminations, and engage in the exchange of presents and confections. During the celebration, diyas are ignited and arranged in rows along the parapets of temples and residences, as well as released on rivers and streams. Homes are adorned with intricate rangoli designs, created using colored rice, sand, or flower petals, which are spread on both indoor and outdoor floors. Houses keep their doors and windows open, hoping that Lakshmi may enter and bestow prosperity and success upon the people.

Multiple festivals, regardless of religious affiliation, are enthusiastically celebrated throughout the country. The mentioned festivals include Brahmatsavam, Eid-ul-Fitar, Nauroz, Eid-Milad-ul-Nabi, Moharram, Christmas, Gurupurab, Ramnavami, Dussehra, Maha Shivratri, and Durga Puja.

3.3.7 The Kumbh Mela, one of the most ancient and extensive events in the world, takes place in Prayaga, Haridwar, Ujjain, and Nasik at intervals of around 12 years. Countless devotees partake in the ritual of immersing themselves in revered rivers such as the Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, and Shipra. It functions as a worldwide gathering of religious pilgrims, promoting socio-religious awareness and bolstering the country's tourism sector. The Kumbh Mela holds significant spiritual significance for the nation, captivating and deeply impacting ordinary Indians. The event encompasses the fields of astronomy, astrology, spirituality, ritualistic traditions, and social and cultural conventions and practices, resulting in a wealth of knowledge. Being hosted in four distinct cities across India, this festival encompasses a variety of social and cultural events, resulting in a rich tapestry of cultural diversity. The transmission of knowledge and skills pertaining to the tradition occurs through old religious writings, oral traditions, historical travelogues, and works authored by distinguished historians. Nevertheless, the teacher-student bond among the sadhus in the ashrams and akharas remains the paramount means of transmitting and protecting information and expertise pertaining to the Kumbh Mela. It was included in the 2017 list of global intangible cultural heritage.

3.3.8 The Pushkar Mela, in Ajmer City, Rajasthan, has a grand cattle fair known as the Camel Fair, which is held annually for five days on Karthik Purnima, often occurring in October–November. This event draws a large number of tourists from various regions. This dynamic fair exhibits the opulent cultural legacy of Rajasthan. The event commences with a grand parade of exquisitely decorated camels, dressed with traditional necklaces, anklets, and brightly colored bridles. Additionally, there are competitions held for camel milking and determining the finest design for fur cutting. However, the dancing competition is the most highly anticipated event. The audience is captivated by the melodious sound of anklets synchronized with the music, while the day concludes with a cultural performance by the local artists.

3.3.9 Jagannath Rath Yatra Encompassing a majestic parade, numerous worshipers accompany the Jagannath Chariot from the Jagannath temple to the Gundicha temple, including a stop at the Mausai Maa shrine. At Mausai Maa temple, devotees are provided with their preferred cuisine. Fairs and festivals are an essential component of every faith. Regarding the fairs, festivals, and ceremonial attire (veshas) of Lord Jagannath, Hindus surpass any other religious groups. These occurrences are significant events in the fields of agriculture, religion, or socio-cultural activities. Festivals, typically associated with religious observances and regarded as sacred events, are commonly referred to as "days" or "periods" in the traditional sense of the word. The fairs and festivals of Lord Jagannath embody the cultural, traditional, historical, and legendary aspects of devotion, prayer, processions, dances, music, feasting, fasting, and charitable acts associated with the traditional figures. Festivals appear to be paramount and conspicuous.

3.3.10 Pongal, A triennial Hindu festival is celebrated across South India. The celebration takes place on the winter solstice, which marks the sun's transition from its southernmost point to the north and its re-entry into the sign of makara (Capricorn), often occurring on January 14, according to the traditional Hindu reckoning system. The month prior to Pongal is regarded as consisting entirely of inauspicious days, while the month after Pongal is characterized by auspicious days. The festival derives its name from the Tamil term "to boil," as it involves boiling rice in milk and offering it initially to the deities, followed by the cows, and lastly to family members. During the customary visits that accompany Hindu festivals, the expected greeting, "Has the rice boiled?" is responded to with, "It has boiled." Cows are revered at Pongal, with their horns adorned with paint and garlands of flowers and fruit. They are then transported in a procession and given the freedom to graze.

In addition to widely celebrated Hindu festivals like Durga Ashtami, Gangaur, Ramleela, and regional fairs such as Nagaur, India is home to a rich mosaic of religious and cultural observances that reflect its pluralistic ethos. Islamic festivals such as Eid-ul-Fitr, Eid-ul-Adha, Muharram, and Shab-e-Barat are celebrated with reverence and community participation across the country, reinforcing values of charity, remembrance, and unity. Similarly, Nowruz, observed by the Parsi and Shia communities, signifies renewal and spiritual cleansing, adding a Zoroastrian dimension to India's cultural calendar. Christian festivals, particularly Christmas, mark the birth of Jesus Christ and are celebrated with devotion and festivity, especially in regions with significant Christian populations such as Goa, Kerala, and the

Northeast. Sikh festivals such as Baisakhi and Gurpurab, Buddhist celebrations like Buddha Purnima, and Jain observances including Mahavir Jayanti, further demonstrate the country's religious diversity and interwoven traditions.

Regional festivals such as Onam in Kerala, Bihu in Assam, Hornbill Festival in Nagaland, Garia Puja in Tripura, Tusu Parab in Jharkhand, and Puskar Fair in Rajasthan are not merely expressions of local customs but also powerful markers of regional identity, ecological cycles, and community bonding. These celebrations are deeply embedded in local histories, agrarian practices, and spiritual beliefs, thereby offering unique insights into the lived experiences of diverse Indian communities. Collectively, these national and regional festivals contribute profoundly to the shaping of India's socio-cultural identity. They foster communal harmony, sustain oral and performative traditions, and serve as vital vehicles for the intergenerational transmission of intangible heritage. Their continued observance in contemporary India illustrates the resilience of tradition amid changing societal dynamics.

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FAIRS AND FESTIVALS

India's fairs and festivals serve as colorful exhibitions of the nation's rich cultural fabric, bringing together a variety of the country's customs, languages, music, dance, and rituals. The preservation and dissemination of the nation's intangible legacy are both significantly aided by the events that are being discussed here. These festivals contribute to the preservation and transmission of skills and practices that are inherent in India's cultural variety. They do this by providing a forum for traditional artists and craftsmen. Through the use of performances, ceremonies, and demonstrations that take place during these festivals, traditional skills and practices are maintained and passed down. Additionally, fairs and festivals play an important part in the preservation of endangered traditions, the promotion of folk music and dance, the development of communities, and the promotion of social cohesion if they are successful.

There is a correlation between the celebration of national holidays and the growth of patriotism and a sense of sacrifice for the nation among the populace. A sense of global brotherhood is fostered among people of different religions, castes, and sects via the celebration of religious festivals, which bring together families and communities. Seasonal festivals are held with the purpose of bringing people closer to nature and increasing their knowledge of the production and availability of food. In addition, these cultural events provide the younger generation with significant educational opportunities, which in turn contribute to tourism and raise awareness of global issues. In addition to ensuring the continuation of time-honored traditions, they constitute an essential component of India's intangible legacy. Nevertheless, it is of the utmost importance to find a balance between development and preservation, adapting cultural practices to a global perspective while preserving their uniqueness.

In recent years, there has been a growing concern regarding the possibility of indigenous flavors becoming watered down at traditional celebrations and fairs as a result of the impact of Western societies. The need to educate the next generation about genuine festivities and promote the preservation of cultural heritage in its purest form is brought to light by this. In addition, fairs and festivals are a key contributor to the expansion of the nation's economy through the phenomenon of tourism. Because these events attract tourists who are interested in learning about the local culture, climate, ecology, and historical architecture of various locations, tourism is a significant source of job and financial development. When event festivals are organized at tourist attractions, the seasonality of these locations is extended, which in turn fosters community pride and strengthens bonds between the community that is hosting the festival and the guests who come to visit. This, in turn, helps to encourage ecotourism since increasing economic activities lend support to local businesses such as hotels, catering, transportation, and entertainment activities.

There has been a significant increase in the amount of effort put into promoting and maintaining cultural practices within the realm of intangible heritage. There are a number of organizations that play a progressive role in the protection of intangible heritage, including UNESCO, INTACH, and ICOMOS. Contributing to the ongoing celebration, preservation, and dissemination of India's rich cultural legacy is the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) convention on intangible heritage, which offers efficient solutions for conservation and preservation. Iconic celebrations such as Durga Puja, Ganga Sagar Mela, Kumbh Mela, and Jagannath Rath Yatra are further examples of the tenacity and continuity of these cultural activities throughout the course of history.

5. CONCLUSION

There is no denying the fact that fairs and festivals play an essential part in the culture and society of our communities. They are in possession of distinctive cultural beliefs, knowledge, and abilities that are traditional. The history of the ages, as well as the development of society and culture, are depicted via these fairs and festivals. Considering that we are a part of the cultural heritage, it is our duty to protect and maintain it for the benefit of future generations. It is necessary for us to disseminate the information and knowledge that we have about the advantages of preserving it to other people. In addition to this, we ought to educate the public about the significance of heritage, which found in both tangible and intangible materials.

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