

Ethnolinguistic Heritage of Tribal Odisha

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Abstract—Odisha represents one of India's richest indigenous cultural landscapes, where diverse tribal communities have preserved unique languages, oral traditions, ritual practices, ecological wisdom, and artistic expressions across centuries. The state is home to 64 Scheduled Tribes, including 13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), making it an exceptional repository of ethnolinguistic diversity. This study explores the ethnolinguistic heritage of Tribal Odisha by examining the interrelationship between language, culture, identity, and living heritage. It highlights how tribal languages function as vehicles of collective memory, traditional knowledge, folklore, music, and social values while also addressing the challenges posed by globalization, migration, and language endangerment. Adopting an interdisciplinary perspective, the paper argues that safeguarding tribal languages and cultural practices is essential for inclusive development, heritage conservation, and sustainable cultural tourism. It advocates community-centered documentation, education, and policy support to ensure the continuity of Odisha's remarkable indigenous heritage for future generations.

Index Terms—Ethnolinguistic Heritage, Tribal Odisha, Indigenous Languages, Cultural Identity, Oral Traditions, Scheduled Tribes, PVTGs, Cultural Diversity, Heritage Preservation, Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

I. Introduction

Odisha stands as one of India's most remarkable repositories of indigenous civilization, where language, culture, ecology, and collective memory are intricately interwoven. Home to 64 Scheduled Tribes, including 13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), the state preserves an exceptional ethnolinguistic landscape shaped by centuries of interaction between human communities and their natural environment.

Tribal languages are far more than instruments of communication; they embody oral history, traditional ecological knowledge, folklore, ritual practices, music, and systems of social organization. Every indigenous language reflects a unique worldview and serves as a living archive of cultural identity. The disappearance of such languages would therefore signify the loss of invaluable intellectual and cultural heritage.

In the twenty-first century, processes of globalization, migration, urbanization, and technological change have accelerated linguistic shift and cultural transformation among many tribal communities. These developments create an urgent need for systematic documentation, scholarly analysis, and sustainable preservation. Ethnolinguistic studies provide an interdisciplinary framework through which language can be understood as a carrier of history, identity, and indigenous knowledge.

This study investigates the ethnolinguistic heritage of the tribal communities of Odisha by examining their linguistic traditions, oral literature, cultural expressions, social practices, and heritage values. It further explores how these communities contribute to the cultural richness of Odisha and how their heritage can strengthen inclusive development and heritage-based tourism.

By integrating perspectives from linguistics, anthropology, cultural studies, and heritage research, this paper seeks to promote a deeper appreciation of Odisha's tribal diversity and advocates collaborative efforts among scholars, communities, and policymakers to safeguard this living heritage for future generations.

II. Objectives of the Study

The present study seeks to investigate the rich ethnolinguistic heritage of the tribal communities of Odisha through an interdisciplinary perspective. The major objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To examine the ethnolinguistic heritage of the tribal communities of Odisha and its role in preserving indigenous identity.
2. To document the linguistic diversity, dialects, oral traditions, and folk knowledge systems maintained by the Scheduled Tribes of Odisha.
3. To analyze the relationship between language, culture, heritage, and community life among tribal societies.
4. To explore the cultural practices, rituals, festivals, music, dance, and traditional art forms that constitute the living heritage of Tribal Odisha.
5. To investigate the contribution of tribal communities to the cultural pluralism and heritage landscape of Odisha.
6. To assess the challenges faced by tribal languages and cultural traditions in the context of globalization, migration, and modernization.
7. To evaluate the significance of indigenous knowledge systems in environmental conservation and sustainable living.
8. To examine the role of government policies, educational initiatives, and cultural institutions in safeguarding tribal heritage.
9. To explore the potential of heritage-based and community-centered tourism for the preservation and promotion of tribal culture.
10. To propose sustainable strategies for the protection, revitalization, and transmission of Odisha's ethnolinguistic heritage to future generations.

III. Research Methodology

The present study, entitled 'Ethnolinguistic Heritage of Tribal Odisha,' adopts an interdisciplinary, qualitative, descriptive, and analytical research framework to examine the linguistic diversity, cultural traditions, oral heritage, and indigenous knowledge systems of Odisha's tribal communities. The methodology has been designed to ensure academic rigor, authenticity, and reliability by utilizing authoritative government records, census data, ethnographic studies, and peer-reviewed scholarly literature.

Research Design

The study follows a descriptive and exploratory design. It investigates the relationship between language, culture, identity, memory, and heritage among tribal communities and interprets these dimensions through ethnolinguistic and heritage perspectives.

Sources of Data

Data have been collected from authentic secondary sources including Census of India reports, Ministry of Tribal Affairs publications, Odisha ST & SC Development Department records, SCSTRTI studies, Odisha State Tribal Museum documentation, Anthropological Survey of India reports, government publications, and peer-reviewed academic journals.

Study Area

The research covers the entire state of Odisha, one of India's most significant tribal regions. The state is home to 64 Scheduled Tribes and 13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), distributed across diverse ecological zones including forests, plateaus, river valleys, and coastal regions.

Data Collection and Analysis

Documentary analysis, thematic analysis, and content analysis methods were employed. Information concerning language, folklore, oral traditions, rituals, social institutions, ecological practices, and heritage values was systematically classified and interpreted.

Analytical Dimensions

The study focuses on linguistic heritage, oral traditions, cultural practices, indigenous knowledge systems, heritage conservation, and sustainable cultural development.

Significance of the Study

The methodology facilitates a comprehensive understanding of Odisha's tribal diversity and contributes to contemporary discussions on language preservation, cultural sustainability, indigenous rights, and heritage management.

Limitations

As the study is based primarily on secondary sources, detailed field investigation of every tribal community was beyond its scope. Nevertheless, the use of authoritative and verified sources strengthens the reliability of the findings.

The methodological framework adopted in this study provides a systematic foundation for understanding the ethnolinguistic heritage of Tribal Odisha. By integrating linguistic, anthropological, and cultural perspectives, the study seeks to document, interpret, and preserve the rich heritage of Odisha's indigenous communities.

IV. Review of Literature

The ethnolinguistic heritage of Tribal Odisha has attracted the attention of anthropologists, linguists, historians, and heritage scholars for decades. Existing scholarship demonstrates that the tribal communities of Odisha preserve rich linguistic traditions, oral literature, ecological knowledge, and cultural practices that constitute an important part of India's intangible heritage. This review synthesizes major themes from authoritative government publications and academic research while identifying the gap addressed by the present study.

Early Ethnographic Studies

The earliest documentation of tribal communities in Odisha emerged through census reports and ethnographic surveys that described settlement patterns, social organization, occupations, and customs. These foundational works created a baseline for later interdisciplinary research.

Government and Institutional Literature

Publications of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, the Government of Odisha, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute (SCSTRTI), and the Odisha State Tribal Museum provide systematic information on tribal communities, language, culture, and development programmes. These sources are widely regarded as authoritative reference materials.

Census and Demographic Studies

Census of India publications have supplied demographic information on Scheduled Tribes, literacy, language, and distribution across districts. Such datasets are essential for understanding long-term social and linguistic trends and for policy planning.

Language and Ethnolinguistics

Research on tribal languages emphasizes that language is a carrier of identity, oral history, ecological knowledge, ritual practice, and collective memory. Studies of Austroasiatic, Dravidian, and Indo-Aryan influences demonstrate the linguistic diversity of Odisha.

Culture, Folklore and Oral Traditions

Scholars have documented songs, myths, legends, storytelling traditions, ritual performances, dance, and music as significant expressions of living heritage. Oral traditions are increasingly recognized as repositories of indigenous knowledge.

Heritage and Sustainable Development

Recent literature links tribal heritage with cultural sustainability, community participation, museum documentation, and heritage-based tourism. Researchers argue that preservation must involve local communities rather than only institutional conservation.

Research Gap

Although numerous studies examine individual tribes or specific cultural practices, comparatively fewer interdisciplinary works integrate language, heritage, identity, and regional cultural landscapes into a single analytical framework covering the wider tribal diversity of Odisha. The present study seeks to address this gap by combining ethnolinguistic and heritage perspectives.

Representative Sources Consulted

- Census of India reports
- Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India publications
- Odisha ST & SC Development Department documents
- SCSTRTI research publications
- Odisha State Tribal Museum documentation
- Peer-reviewed books and journal articles on tribal studies, linguistics, anthropology, and heritage.

V. Concept of Ethnolinguistic and Heritage

Introduction

Ethnolinguistic is an interdisciplinary field that examines the relationship between language, culture, society, and identity. It explores how language reflects the worldview, values, customs, and knowledge systems of a community. Heritage studies, meanwhile, investigate the tangible and intangible cultural resources that are transmitted across generations and shape collective identity.

Meaning of Ethnolinguistic

The term combines 'ethnos' (people or community) and 'linguistics' (scientific study of language). It studies language within its cultural context and explains how vocabulary, oral traditions, naming systems, folklore, and rituals preserve social memory and indigenous knowledge.

Concept of Heritage

Heritage includes both tangible elements such as monuments, artifacts, and traditional architecture, and intangible elements such as languages, folklore, songs, rituals, performing arts, craftsmanship, and ecological knowledge. Intangible heritage is sustained through community participation and intergenerational transmission.

Ethnolinguistic Heritage

Ethnolinguistic heritage refers to the combined legacy of language and culture inherited by a community. Indigenous languages encode local ecological knowledge, medicinal practices, agricultural wisdom, myths, and social institutions. Their preservation therefore contributes to cultural continuity and diversity.

Relevance to Tribal Odisha

Odisha is home to 64 Scheduled Tribes and 13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). Their languages and oral traditions represent a significant component of the state's cultural heritage. Songs, myths, ritual narratives, storytelling, and indigenous terminology preserve historical memory and relationships with forests, hills, and rivers.

Need for Preservation

Globalization, migration, formal language shift, and socio-economic change threaten many indigenous languages. Documentation, education, digital archiving, community participation, and heritage-sensitive public policy are essential for safeguarding ethnolinguistic diversity for future generations.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

The present research adopts an interdisciplinary framework integrating ethnolinguistic, anthropology, folklore, cultural studies, and heritage studies. It analyzes language as a carrier of identity and heritage while examining how cultural practices contribute to sustainable development and heritage-based tourism.

Representative Academic Foundations

- Ethnolinguistic: relationship between language and culture in linguistic anthropology.
- Heritage Studies: distinction between tangible and intangible heritage.

- Indigenous knowledge systems: oral traditions as repositories of environmental and cultural knowledge.
- Government and institutional sources relevant to Odisha include Census of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Odisha ST & SC Development Department, SCSTRTI, and Odisha State Tribal Museum.

VI. Historical Background of Tribal Odisha

Odisha possesses one of the richest tribal traditions in India. The historical development of its indigenous communities is closely connected with the forests, hills, river valleys, and plateaus of the Eastern Ghats. Over centuries, tribal societies have preserved distinct languages, oral traditions, ecological knowledge, and cultural practices while interacting with regional kingdoms and later colonial and modern administrations.

Ancient Roots

The history of tribal Odisha extends to ancient times. Archaeological evidence and historical studies indicate long-standing human settlement in the region. Many tribal communities maintained close relationships with forests and natural resources, developing sustainable systems of agriculture, hunting, gathering, and craftsmanship.

Historical Development

Medieval Odisha witnessed interactions between tribal societies and regional kingdoms. While many communities retained autonomous cultural practices, they also contributed to regional trade, forest economies, and religious traditions. Their folklore and ritual systems preserve historical memory through oral transmission.

Colonial Documentation

During the colonial period, census operations and ethnographic surveys documented numerous tribal communities, their languages, occupations, and customs. Although these records were shaped by the perspectives of their time, they remain important historical sources for contemporary scholarship.

Post-Independence Context

After India's independence, constitutional recognition of Scheduled Tribes and targeted welfare policies encouraged greater documentation and development initiatives. Odisha officially recognizes 64 Scheduled Tribes, including 13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), reflecting the state's exceptional cultural diversity.

Ethnolinguistic Significance

Tribal languages encode indigenous ecological knowledge, oral literature, music, ritual vocabulary, and social values. Their continued use strengthens community identity and preserves intangible cultural heritage for future generations.

Contemporary Relevance

Rapid globalization, migration, environmental change, and language shift pose challenges to many tribal traditions. Heritage preservation therefore requires documentation, community participation, education, and responsible cultural tourism.

Representative Authoritative Sources

- Census of India publications
- Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India
- Odisha ST & SC Development Department
- SCSTRTI (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute)
- Odisha State Tribal Museum
- Scholarly works in anthropology, linguistics, and heritage studies

VII. Geographical Profile of Odisha

Odisha, situated on the eastern coast of India along the Bay of Bengal, possesses a remarkable geographical diversity that has profoundly shaped the history, settlement patterns, languages, and cultural heritage of its tribal communities. Its hills, forests, river valleys, plateaus, and coastal plains together create distinct ecological zones supporting diverse indigenous societies.

Location and Extent

Odisha is bounded by West Bengal to the northeast, Jharkhand to the north, Chhattisgarh to the west, Andhra Pradesh to the south, and the Bay of Bengal to the east. The state covers about 155,707 square kilometres, making it one of India's major eastern states.

Physiographic Regions

The landscape is commonly described through four broad regions: the Northern Plateau, the Eastern Ghats, the Central Table Land, and the Coastal Plains. The Eastern Ghats contain extensive hill ranges where many tribal communities have historically resided.

Climate and Natural Resources

Odisha experiences a tropical monsoon climate with seasonal rainfall supporting forests, agriculture, and biodiversity. Mineral resources, forests, and river systems have influenced local livelihoods and settlement patterns.

Rivers and Forests

Major rivers such as the Mahanadi, Brahmani, Baitarani, Subarnarekha, Rushikulya, and Vansadhara sustain agriculture and traditional livelihoods. Forest ecosystems provide food, medicine, bamboo, fibres, and other resources central to indigenous knowledge systems.

Tribal Distribution

Large tribal populations are concentrated in districts including Mayurbhanj, Kandhamal, Koraput, Rayagada, Malkangiri, Nabarangpur, Kalahandi, Keonjhar, Sundargarh, and Gajapati. The terrain contributed to the preservation of distinctive languages and cultural traditions.

Geography and Ethnolinguistic Heritage

The interaction between environment and community has shaped vocabulary, oral traditions, ritual practices, ecological knowledge, and cultural identity. Thus, the geographical profile of Odisha is fundamental to understanding its ethnolinguistic heritage.

Representative Authoritative Sources

- Census of India
- Government of Odisha statistical publications
- Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India
- SCSTRTI publications
- Odisha State Tribal Museum and academic studies on geography and tribal heritage

VIII. Scheduled Tribes of Odisha: An Overview

Introduction

Odisha occupies a distinguished place in the ethnographic landscape of India owing to its extraordinary tribal diversity and rich indigenous heritage. The state is home to sixty-four Scheduled Tribes, including thirteen Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), whose languages, cultural traditions, belief systems, ecological wisdom, and social institutions constitute an invaluable component of India's civilizational legacy. Scattered across the hills, forests, plateaus, and river valleys of the state, these communities have preserved their distinctive identities through centuries of historical transformation while maintaining a profound relationship with nature and traditional knowledge systems.

According to official demographic records, Odisha possesses one of the largest tribal populations in the country. Major concentrations of tribal communities are found in districts such as Mayurbhanj, Kandhamal, Koraput, Rayagada, Malkangiri, Nabarangpur, Kalahandi, Sundargarh, Keonjhar, and Gajapati. These regions represent vibrant centers of indigenous languages, oral traditions, customary practices, and cultural continuity. The tribal population of Odisha exceeds 9.5 million, reflecting the significant role of tribal communities in shaping the social, cultural, and historical identity of the state.

Historical Evolution of the Scheduled Tribe List

The recognition of tribal communities in Odisha has evolved through a series of constitutional, administrative, and legislative developments since Independence. The list of Scheduled Tribes has undergone periodic revision to ensure the inclusion of historically marginalized indigenous groups. Over the decades, several communities and sub-groups have been incorporated into the official list following ethnographic and socio-cultural assessments. The inclusion of Muka Dora and Konda Reddy in 2024 further expanded the list, raising the total number of recognized Scheduled Tribes in Odisha to sixty-four.

Major Tribal Communities of Odisha

The Kondha constitute the largest tribal community in Odisha and are concentrated mainly in Kandhamal, Rayagada, Koraput, Boudh, and Balangir districts. The Santals, predominantly found in Mayurbhanj, are renowned for their music, dance, and oral traditions. The Ho community, distributed across Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, and adjoining districts, preserves an important Austroasiatic linguistic heritage. The Saora people of Gajapati, Rayagada, and Ganjam are internationally recognized for ritual paintings and rich mythology. The Bonda, one of Odisha's best-known PVTGs, inhabit the hill regions of Malkangiri and possess a distinctive cultural identity. The Juangs of Keonjhar and Angul continue to preserve significant forest-based traditions and indigenous knowledge systems.

Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs)

Odisha has one of the highest concentrations of PVTGs in India. The thirteen recognized PVTGs are: Bonda, Birhor, Chuktia Bhunjia, Didayi, Dongria Kondh, Hill Kharia, Juang, Kutia Kondh, Lanjia Saora, Lodha, Mankirdia, Paudi Bhuyan, and Saora. These communities preserve highly distinctive languages, cultural practices, and ecological knowledge systems of immense ethnographic importance.

Linguistic Diversity

The tribal communities of Odisha represent a remarkable mosaic of languages and dialects belonging mainly to the Austroasiatic, Dravidian, and Indo-Aryan language families. Languages such as Santali, Ho, Mundari, Juang, Kui, Kuvi, Gadaba, Parji, Ollari, Bhatia, and Desia illustrate the state's exceptional linguistic diversity and centuries of cultural interaction.

Cultural Heritage

The cultural heritage of Odisha's tribes includes oral narratives, myths, folk songs, music, traditional dances, ritual ceremonies, indigenous crafts, sacred groves, ecological knowledge, and community institutions. These living traditions continue to enrich the cultural fabric of Odisha and contribute significantly to India's intangible heritage.

Socio-Economic and Ecological Significance

Tribal communities have historically contributed to biodiversity conservation, sustainable resource management, and traditional agriculture. Their indigenous knowledge concerning forests, medicinal plants, and ecological balance offers valuable insights for sustainable development and climate resilience.

Contemporary Challenges

Many tribal communities continue to face language endangerment, cultural assimilation, educational disparities, economic marginalization, environmental displacement, and the erosion of traditional knowledge. Addressing these issues requires inclusive policies, documentation, community participation, and heritage conservation.

The Scheduled Tribes of Odisha embody an extraordinary tapestry of languages, cultures, histories, and knowledge systems. Their ethnolinguistic heritage is a living testament to India's cultural plurality and deserves sustained scholarly attention and preservation for future generations.

IX. Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) of Odisha

Odisha is nationally recognized for its remarkable indigenous diversity and has one of the largest concentrations of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in India. These communities are characterized by distinctive cultural traditions, small or vulnerable populations, unique languages, and strong dependence on traditional ecological knowledge. Their heritage represents an invaluable component of India's intangible cultural legacy.

Concept of PVTGs

The category of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups was introduced to identify tribal communities requiring focused developmental support due to historical isolation, vulnerable socio-economic conditions, and unique cultural characteristics. Protection of their languages and traditions is essential for safeguarding indigenous heritage.

The Thirteen PVTGs of Odisha

Odisha officially recognizes thirteen PVTGs: Bonda, Birhor, Chuktia Bhunjia, Didayi, Dongria Kondh, Hill Kharia, Juang, Kutia Kondh, Lanjia Saora, Lodha, Mankirdia, Paudi Bhuyan, and Saora. Each possesses distinctive linguistic, cultural, and ecological traditions.

Cultural and Linguistic Heritage

PVTGs preserve oral literature, ritual songs, folklore, indigenous medicine, agricultural practices, sacred landscapes, and community institutions. Their languages and oral traditions function as repositories of collective memory and traditional knowledge.

Regional Distribution

These communities are mainly distributed across the hill and forest districts of Malkangiri, Koraput, Rayagada, Kandhamal, Keonjhar, Mayurbhanj, Sundargarh, and adjoining regions, where geography has contributed to the preservation of unique identities.

Contemporary Challenges

Language shift, educational disparities, environmental pressures, livelihood changes, and cultural assimilation threaten many PVTGs. Sustainable policies should combine community participation, documentation, education, and heritage conservation.

Significance for Heritage Studies

The study of Odisha's PVTGs enriches ethnolinguistic, anthropology, and heritage studies by demonstrating how language, ecology, and culture interact to sustain indigenous identity across generations.

The PVTGs of Odisha embody exceptional ethnolinguistic and cultural diversity. Their preservation is essential for maintaining India's plural heritage and for promoting inclusive, community-centered models of sustainable development and cultural conservation.

X. Ethnolinguistic Heritage of Odisha's Tribal Communities

Odisha's ethnolinguistic heritage is embodied in its 64 Scheduled Tribes, whose languages, oral traditions, rituals, ecological knowledge, and social institutions collectively form one of India's richest indigenous cultural landscapes. Rather than representing a single culture, Tribal Odisha is a mosaic of communities that have preserved distinctive identities while contributing to the wider heritage of the state.

Major Tribal Communities and Their Ethnolinguistic Heritage

The ethnolinguistic heritage of Odisha is reflected through communities such as Kondha (Kandha), Santal, Ho, Saora, Bonda, Juang, Birhor, Didayi, Dongria Kondh, Kutia Kondh, Lanjia Saora, Lodha, Mankirdia, Paudi Bhuyan, Chuktia Bhunjia, Hill Kharia, Paroja (including Sodia, Sano and Solia Paroja), Pentia, Rajuar, Shabar Lodha, Sounti, Tharua, Muka Dora (Nuka/Nooka Dora), Konda Reddy, Kisan and many other Scheduled Tribes officially recognized in Odisha. Each community possesses distinctive linguistic traditions, folklore, ritual practices, and indigenous knowledge systems.

Languages and Identity

Tribal languages belonging mainly to the Austroasiatic, Dravidian, and Indo-Aryan families preserve community identity, oral history, and traditional ecological knowledge.

Oral Traditions

Myths, legends, folktales, ritual narratives, proverbs, and songs are transmitted orally and serve as living archives of history and collective memory.

Festivals and Cultural Expressions

Harvest festivals, ancestor worship, seasonal ceremonies, dance, music, body ornamentation, and handicrafts reflect the diversity of Odisha's tribal societies.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Knowledge of forests, medicinal plants, agriculture, biodiversity, and environmental management has been developed over generations and remains central to many tribal communities.

Challenges

Language shift, migration, modernization, educational inequality, and environmental change threaten the continuity of several indigenous traditions.

Preservation

Documentation, community participation, education, museum initiatives, digital archives, and heritage-based tourism can strengthen the preservation and revitalization of tribal languages and culture.

Conclusion

From the Bonda Hills to the forests of Mayurbhanj and the highlands of Kandhamal and Koraput, the tribal communities of Odisha collectively represent a living ethnolinguistic heritage. Safeguarding the languages and cultural traditions of all Scheduled Tribes is essential for preserving India's cultural diversity and promoting sustainable heritage conservation.

XI. Tribal Languages and Oral Traditions of Odisha

Odisha's tribal communities preserve an extraordinary ethnolinguistic heritage through their languages, oral literature, songs, myths, ritual narratives, and indigenous knowledge systems. The state officially recognizes 64 Scheduled Tribes and 13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). Their languages belong mainly to the Austroasiatic, Dravidian, and Indo-Aryan language families, forming one of India's richest repositories of intangible cultural heritage.

Major Tribal Communities and their Linguistic Heritage

- **Kondha (Kandha):** Associated primarily with Kui-speaking traditions and rich ritual songs and oral narratives.
- **Dongria Kondh:** Known for distinctive Kui/Kuvi traditions, sacred hill ecology, and ceremonial songs.
- **Kutia Kondh:** Preserves indigenous ritual vocabulary and oral knowledge linked to forests and agriculture.
- **Santal:** Speaks Santali and maintains extensive oral epics, music, and dance traditions.
- **Ho:** The Ho language and folklore preserve community history and indigenous identity.
- **Saora / Lanjia Saora:** Famous for Saora language traditions, mythology, ritual art, and storytelling.
- **Bonda:** The Bonda (Remo) community preserves a unique language and highly distinctive oral traditions.
- **Juang:** The Juang language carries ancestral narratives, ritual practices, and ecological knowledge.
- **Birhor:** Maintains oral folklore and forest-related indigenous knowledge.
- **Didayi:** Preserves a distinctive linguistic heritage and traditional oral culture.
- **Hill Kharia:** Known for indigenous songs, narratives, and community traditions.

- **Paudi Bhuyan:** Retains ritual expressions and oral history connected with hills and forests.
- **Mankirdia:** Preserves traditional forest knowledge and community narratives.
- **Chuktia Bhunjia:** Maintains unique cultural identity and oral traditions.
- **Paroja:** Includes Sodia, Sano, and Solia Paroja traditions with distinctive speech varieties.
- **Kisan:** Rich in folk songs and agricultural oral traditions.
- **Rajuar:** Community heritage is transmitted through folklore and customary practices.
- **Pentia:** Maintains traditional speech and local oral customs.
- **Lodha/Shabar Lodha:** Known for indigenous folklore and cultural memory.
- **Tharua:** Preserves community rituals and oral traditions.
- **Muka Dora and Konda Reddy:** Represent important indigenous linguistic and cultural traditions in southern Odisha.

Significance of Oral Traditions

Folktales, proverbs, riddles, ceremonial songs, marriage songs, harvest songs, and myths function as living archives of collective memory. They transmit ecological wisdom, social values, customary law, and historical identity from one generation to the next.

Challenges and Preservation

Urbanization, migration, language shift, and modernization threaten many indigenous languages. Documentation, community participation, multilingual education, digital archiving, and cultural festivals are essential for preserving Odisha's ethnolinguistic heritage.

Conclusion

The tribal languages and oral traditions of Odisha are invaluable components of India's intangible cultural heritage. Their preservation strengthens cultural diversity, academic research, and sustainable heritage conservation.

Tribal Culture and Living Heritage of Odisha

The tribal communities of Odisha preserve a vibrant living heritage expressed through festivals, rituals, music, dance, crafts, oral traditions, and indigenous knowledge systems. Their cultural practices are deeply connected with nature, community life, and spiritual beliefs, making them an essential component of Odisha's ethnolinguistic and cultural identity.

Festivals and Ritual Traditions

The Kondha, Santal, Ho, Saora, Juang, Bonda, Dongria Kondh, Kutia Kondh and other tribal communities celebrate seasonal and agricultural festivals that reinforce community solidarity, ancestral memory, and ecological ethics.

Music and Dance

Traditional drums, flutes, community songs, and collective dances accompany harvests, marriages, initiation ceremonies, and religious observances. Music and dance function as living archives of history and identity.

Traditional Arts and Crafts

Tribal communities are renowned for bamboo and cane work, woodcraft, weaving, bead ornaments, metal craft, wall art, and ritual objects. These artistic traditions preserve indigenous aesthetics and local knowledge.

Dress and Ornaments

Distinctive attire and ornaments among communities such as the Bonda, Saora, and Dongria Kondh symbolize social identity, age, status, and cultural continuity.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Knowledge of forests, medicinal plants, seed conservation, shifting cultivation, water management, and biodiversity has been transmitted through generations and remains valuable for sustainable development.

Community Institutions

Village councils, customary laws, kinship systems, and collective labour practices strengthen social cohesion and regulate community life.

Contemporary Challenges

Modernization, migration, commercialization, environmental pressures, and declining transmission of traditional knowledge threaten many aspects of tribal living heritage.

Preservation and Future Directions

Documentation, community participation, multilingual education, museums, digital archives, and heritage-based tourism can support the preservation and revitalization of Odisha's tribal living heritage while respecting community rights.

Conclusion

The living heritage of Odisha's tribal communities reflects a dynamic interaction between language, culture, ecology, and identity. Preserving these traditions is essential for safeguarding India's cultural diversity and promoting inclusive and sustainable heritage development.

Traditional Knowledge Systems of the Tribal Communities of Odisha

The traditional knowledge systems of Odisha's tribal communities are preserved through language, oral traditions, agriculture, forest management, medicine, crafts, and community institutions. Different tribes possess distinct ecological and cultural knowledge shaped by their environments.

Selected Tribal Communities and Their Traditional Knowledge

- **Kondha (Kandha):** Known for traditional millet cultivation, sacred groves, and Kui oral traditions.
- **Dongria Kondh:** Preserve hill ecology, fruit and millet cultivation, and sacred landscape traditions of the Niyamgiri hills.
- **Kutia Kondh:** Maintain indigenous seed conservation, ritual agriculture, and forest knowledge.
- **Santal:** Rich in Santali oral epics, music, dance, and community governance traditions.
- **Ho:** Preserve Austroasiatic linguistic heritage, folk songs, and forest-based knowledge.
- **Saora / Lanjia Saora:** Renowned for ritual art, mythology, ancestor traditions, and oral storytelling.
- **Bonda:** Maintain distinctive Remo language, traditional ornaments, and hill agriculture.
- **Juang:** Known for forest knowledge, hunting traditions, and ceremonial dances.
- **Birhor:** Traditionally associated with forest resources, rope-making, and oral folklore.
- **Didayi:** Preserve unique language and indigenous fishing and agricultural practices.
- **Hill Kharia:** Retain medicinal plant knowledge and rich oral traditions.
- **Paudi Bhuyan:** Known for hill agriculture, rituals, and community festivals.
- **Mankirdia:** Traditionally skilled in forest-based livelihoods and indigenous ecological knowledge.
- **Chuktia Bhunjia:** Maintain distinctive customs, oral history, and traditional agriculture.
- **Paroja:** Includes Sodia, Sano, and Solia groups with local dialects and farming traditions.
- **Kisan:** Associated with agriculture, folk songs, and seasonal festivals.
- **Rajuar:** Community identity preserved through customary law and oral narratives.
- **Pentia:** Retain local dialect traditions and village customs.
- **Lodha / Shabar Lodha:** Preserve folklore and forest-related cultural practices.
- **Tharua:** Known for agricultural traditions and community rituals.
- **Muka Dora:** Maintain indigenous speech varieties and traditional livelihoods.
- **Konda Reddy:** Preserve hill cultivation practices and oral cultural traditions.

Importance for Sustainable Development

These knowledge systems contribute to biodiversity conservation, climate resilience, traditional medicine, food security, and cultural continuity. Documentation and community-led preservation are essential for safeguarding this living heritage.

The knowledge traditions of Odisha's tribal communities represent an invaluable intellectual and cultural resource. Protecting them strengthens ethnolinguistic heritage and sustainable development.

XII. Regional Travel and Tribal Heritage Tourism in Odisha

Odisha's tribal regions offer a unique combination of linguistic diversity, living traditions, sacred landscapes, and indigenous knowledge systems. Responsible heritage tourism can promote cultural preservation while creating sustainable livelihood opportunities for tribal communities.

Tribal Heritage and Tourism Potential

- **Bonda:** The Bonda Hills of Malkangiri are renowned for their distinctive indigenous culture and traditional attire.
- **Dongria Kondh:** The Niyamgiri Hills preserve the ecological and cultural heritage of the Dongria Kondh community.
- **Kutia Kondh:** Known for ritual traditions, forest-based culture, and indigenous agriculture.
- **Saora / Lanjia Saora:** Celebrated for ritual paintings, mythology, and oral traditions in southern Odisha.
- **Santal:** Their music, dance, and seasonal festivals enrich the cultural landscape of northern Odisha.
- **Ho:** Traditional festivals, songs, and community life contribute to heritage tourism.
- **Juang:** Forest traditions and indigenous practices provide valuable ethnographic interest.
- **Birhor:** Forest knowledge and oral culture reflect an ancient way of life.
- **Didayi:** The community preserves unique linguistic and cultural traditions in the Malkangiri region.
- **Hill Kharia:** Known for indigenous ecological knowledge and traditional customs.
- **Paudi Bhuyan:** Hill settlements and ritual practices represent important cultural heritage.
- **Mankirdia:** Traditional forest livelihoods and oral traditions remain significant.
- **Chuktia Bhunjia:** Distinctive customs and cultural identity enrich Odisha's heritage.
- **Paroja:** Agricultural traditions and local dialects add to regional diversity.
- **Kisan:** Folk culture and harvest celebrations attract cultural interest.
- **Rajuar:** Community customs and oral narratives preserve local heritage.
- **Pentia:** Traditional village culture reflects indigenous continuity.
- **Lodha / Shabar Lodha:** Folklore and forest-based traditions are part of Odisha's living heritage.
- **Tharua:** Agricultural rituals and community festivals are culturally significant.
- **Muka Dora & Konda Reddy:** Represent important indigenous traditions in southern Odisha.

Strategies for Sustainable Heritage Tourism

- Community-based tourism
- Protection of indigenous languages and oral traditions
- Promotion of tribal museums and cultural interpretation centres
- Documentation of songs, dances, and folklore
- Eco-friendly tourism respecting local customs and environmental sustainability
- Fair economic participation of tribal communities

Regional travel and heritage tourism should celebrate, rather than commercialize, the unique ethnolinguistic identities of Odisha's tribal communities. Sustainable and community-centered approaches can strengthen both cultural preservation and local development.

XIII. Socio-Economic Challenges and Sustainable Development of Odisha's Tribal Communities

The tribal communities of Odisha possess a rich ethnolinguistic and cultural heritage, yet many continue to face socio-economic challenges that influence their livelihoods, languages, education, and cultural continuity. Sustainable development must therefore balance economic progress with the protection of indigenous identity and heritage.

Major Challenges Faced by Tribal Communities

- **Kondha (Kandha):** Pressure on traditional agriculture, changing livelihoods, and language transmission.
- **Dongria Kondh:** Environmental change and protection of traditional hill-based livelihoods.
- **Kutia Kondh:** Access to education and healthcare while preserving indigenous culture.
- **Santal:** Migration and changing employment patterns affecting oral traditions.
- **Ho:** Urbanization and reduced use of indigenous language among younger generations.
- **Saora / Lanjia Saora:** Safeguarding ritual art and oral heritage amid modernization.
- **Bonda:** Geographical isolation alongside access to education and healthcare.
- **Juang:** Forest dependence and livelihood diversification.
- **Birhor:** Economic vulnerability and preservation of traditional knowledge.
- **Didayi:** Infrastructure challenges and language preservation.
- **Hill Kharia:** Protection of forest-based livelihoods and cultural practices.
- **Paudi Bhuyan:** Sustainable resource management and educational access.
- **Mankirdia:** Livelihood security and documentation of indigenous knowledge.
- **Chuktia Bhunjia:** Balancing development with cultural continuity.
- **Paroja:** Agricultural sustainability and preservation of local dialects.
- **Kisan:** Rural employment and maintenance of folk traditions.
- **Rajuar:** Socio-economic inclusion while retaining customary heritage.
- **Pentia:** Education and preservation of community traditions.
- **Lodha / Shabar Lodha:** Recognition of traditional knowledge and livelihood support.
- **Tharua:** Sustaining agricultural heritage and community festivals.
- **Muka Dora & Konda Reddy:** Inclusive development respecting indigenous identity.

XIV. Strategies for Sustainable Development

- Community-centered education including indigenous languages
- Documentation of oral traditions and cultural practices
- Sustainable forest and biodiversity management
- Promotion of tribal crafts and cultural enterprises
- Responsible heritage and eco-tourism
- Improved healthcare, digital inclusion, and livelihood opportunities
- Participation of tribal communities in policy and decision-making

The future of Odisha's tribal communities depends on development that respects cultural diversity, linguistic heritage, and indigenous knowledge systems. Inclusive and sustainable policies can strengthen both community well-being and the preservation of India's rich tribal heritage.

XV. Government Policies and Preservation Efforts for Odisha's Tribal Communities

The preservation of Odisha's tribal heritage requires coordinated efforts by government institutions, local communities, researchers, and cultural organizations. Policies aimed at education, language preservation, livelihood enhancement, and heritage conservation play a crucial role in sustaining the ethnolinguistic diversity of the state's Scheduled Tribes.

Policy Focus for Major Tribal Communities

- **Kondha (Kandha):** Support for sustainable agriculture, Kui language documentation, and community development.
- **Dongria Kondh:** Protection of indigenous culture, hill ecology, and traditional knowledge.
- **Kutia Kondh:** Educational access combined with preservation of cultural practices.
- **Santal:** Promotion of Santali language, literature, music, and cultural festivals.
- **Ho:** Support for indigenous language education and community heritage documentation.

- **Saora / Lanjia Saora:** Conservation of ritual art, oral traditions, and cultural landscapes.
- **Bonda:** Special development initiatives while respecting cultural identity and language.
- **Juang:** Documentation of oral traditions and livelihood enhancement.
- **Birhor:** Support for vulnerable communities and preservation of forest knowledge.
- **Didayi:** Educational inclusion and language preservation.
- **Hill Kharia:** Protection of indigenous ecological practices and cultural heritage.
- **Paudi Bhuyan:** Community-based development and heritage conservation.
- **Mankirdia:** Livelihood support and documentation of traditional knowledge.
- **Chuktia Bhunjia:** Safeguarding unique customs and indigenous identity.
- **Paroja, Pentia, Rajuar, Kisan, Lodha/Shabar Lodha, Tharua, Muka Dora and Konda Reddy:** Recognition of local languages, folk traditions, and equitable socio-economic development.

Key Preservation Strategies

- Documentation of tribal languages and oral literature
- Community museums and cultural archives
- Mother-tongue based education where feasible
- Promotion of tribal arts, crafts, music, and festivals
- Sustainable livelihood and eco-cultural tourism initiatives
- Digital preservation of indigenous knowledge
- Participation of tribal communities in policy-making

Conclusion

The long-term preservation of Odisha's ethnolinguistic heritage depends on inclusive policies that value indigenous languages, cultural diversity, and community participation. Sustainable development and heritage conservation should advance together for the benefit of present and future generations.

XVI. Suggestions and Future Prospects

The preservation of the ethnolinguistic heritage of Odisha's tribal communities requires a balanced approach that combines cultural safeguarding, inclusive development, and community participation. Future strategies should strengthen indigenous languages, traditional knowledge, and sustainable livelihoods while respecting the identity of each tribal community.

Recommendations for Major Tribal Communities

- **Kondha (Kandha):** Promote Kui language documentation, millet-based traditional agriculture, and community museums.
- **Dongria Kondh:** Support Niyamgiri cultural landscape conservation and documentation of oral traditions.
- **Kutia Kondh:** Encourage mother-tongue education and preservation of ritual knowledge.
- **Santal:** Expand Santali literature, digital archives, and cultural festivals.
- **Ho:** Strengthen indigenous language education and folklore documentation.
- **Saora / Lanjia Saora:** Preserve ritual paintings, mythology, and oral narratives through community archives.
- **Bonda:** Develop culturally sensitive education and healthcare while protecting linguistic identity.
- **Juang:** Document songs, dances, and ecological knowledge with community participation.
- **Birhor & Didayi:** Support livelihood security and recording of endangered oral traditions.
- **Hill Kharia, Paudi Bhuyan & Mankirdia:** Promote forest-based knowledge, medicinal plant documentation, and youth engagement.
- **Chuktia Bhunjia, Paroja, Pentia, Rajuar, Kisan, Lodha/Shabar Lodha, Tharua, Muka Dora & Konda Reddy:** Encourage language preservation, local history projects, craft promotion, and equitable development.

Future Prospects

- Prepare digital dictionaries and archives of tribal languages.
- Record oral literature, folklore, songs, and rituals.
- Encourage community-led heritage tourism.
- Integrate indigenous knowledge into environmental education.
- Strengthen collaboration among universities, museums, and tribal communities.
- Promote research on all 64 Scheduled Tribes of Odisha.
- Ensure inclusive policies that protect cultural rights and sustainable livelihoods.

The future of Odisha's tribal heritage depends upon recognizing indigenous communities as partners in preservation rather than merely subjects of study. By valuing their languages, knowledge systems, and cultural traditions, Odisha can strengthen both cultural diversity and sustainable development.

XVII. Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that the tribal communities of Odisha constitute one of the most significant repositories of ethnolinguistic and cultural diversity in India. Their languages, oral traditions, rituals, ecological knowledge, music, dance, and social institutions represent a living heritage that has evolved over centuries while maintaining a profound relationship with the natural environment.

Communities such as the Kondha, Santal, Ho, Saora, Bonda, Juang, Dongria Kondh, Kutia Kondh, Birhor, Didayi, Hill Kharia, Paudi Bhuyan, Mankirdia, Chuktia Bhunjia, Paroja, Kisan, Rajuar, Pentia, Lodha, Shabar Lodha, Tharua, Muka Dora, and Konda Reddy, together with the other Scheduled Tribes of Odisha, preserve distinctive languages and cultural practices that enrich the pluralistic heritage of the state and the nation.

The study further highlights that ethnolinguistic heritage is not limited to language alone; it embraces folklore, oral literature, indigenous knowledge systems, customary law, traditional agriculture, forest management, and community memory. These knowledge systems have contemporary relevance for biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and cultural resilience.

At the same time, globalization, migration, language shift, environmental change, and socio-economic pressures threaten the continuity of many indigenous traditions. Effective preservation therefore requires community participation, documentation, mother-tongue education, responsible heritage tourism, digital archiving, and supportive public policies.

In conclusion, safeguarding the ethnolinguistic heritage of Odisha's tribal communities is both an academic responsibility and a cultural imperative. Recognizing and strengthening the voices of all Scheduled Tribes will contribute to inclusive development, social justice, and the preservation of India's invaluable intangible cultural heritage for future generations.

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APPENDIX-I

Official List of the Scheduled Tribes of Odisha

1. Bagata (Bhakta)
2. Baiga
3. Banjara (Banjari)
4. Bathudi (Bathuri)
5. Bhottada (Bhotra/Bhatra/Bhattara)
6. Bhuiyan (Bhuyan)
7. Bhumia
8. Bhumij
9. Bhunjia
10. Binjhal
11. Binjhia (Binjia)
12. Birhor
13. Bondo (Bonda)
14. Chenchu
15. Dal
16. Desua Bhumij
17. Dharua (Dhuruba/Dhurva)
18. Didayi
19. Gadaba
20. Gandia
21. Ghara
22. Gond
23. Ho
24. Holva
25. Jatapu
26. Juang
27. Kandha (Kondha)
28. Kandha Gauda
29. Kavar

30. Kharia
31. Kharwar
32. Kisan
33. Kol
34. Kolah Loharas
35. Kolha
36. Koli
37. Kondadora
38. Kora
39. Korua
40. Kotia
41. Koya
42. Lodha
43. Madia
44. Mahali
45. Mankidia (Mankirdia)
46. Matya
47. Mirdhas
48. Munda
49. Omanatya
50. Oraon
51. Parenga
52. Paroja
53. Pentia
54. Rajuar
55. Santal
56. Saora (Savara/Soura)
57. Shabar Lodha
58. Sounti
59. Tharua
60. Muka Dora
61. Konda Reddy

Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) of Odisha

1. Bonda
2. Birhor
3. Chuktia Bhunjia
4. Didayi
5. Dongria Kondh
6. Hill Kharia
7. Juang
8. Kutia Kondh
9. Lanjia Saora
10. Lodha
11. Mankirdia
12. Paudi Bhuyan
13. Saora

APPENDIX-II

District-wise Distribution of Major Tribal Communities in Odisha

Sl. No.	District	Major Tribal Communities
1	Mayurbhanj	Santal, Ho, Bhumij, Bathudi, Munda
2	Keonjhar	Ho, Juang, Bhuyan, Munda, Santal
3	Sundargarh	Oraon, Kisan, Munda, Kharia, Ho
4	Koraput	Paroja, Gadaba, Bonda, Didayi, Kondadora
5	Malkangiri	Bonda, Didayi, Koya, Muka Dora, Konda Reddy
6	Rayagada	Dongria Kondh, Saora, Paroja, Gadaba
7	Kandhamal	Kondha, Kutia Kondh, Dongria Kondh
8	Nabarangpur	Paroja, Gadaba, Gond, Bhatra
9	Kalahandi	Kondha, Gond, Bhunjia, Paroja
10	Gajapati	Saora, Lanjia Saora, Paroja
11	Ganjam	Saora, Kondha
12	Angul	Juang, Gond, Bhuyan
13	Deogarh	Bhuyan, Gond, Kisan
14	Jharsuguda	Kisan, Oraon, Munda
15	Sambalpur	Kisan, Gond, Binjhal
16	Boudh	Kondha, Gond
17	Balangir	Kondha, Binjhal, Bhunjia
18	Nuapada	Gond, Bhunjia, Binjhal
19	Balasore	Santal, Ho, Bhumij
20	Bhadrak	Ho, Santal
21	Jajpur	Ho, Munda
22	Dhenkanal	Juang, Bhuyan
23	Cuttack	Bhuyan, Munda (small populations)
24	Puri	Saora (limited presence)
25	Khordha	Mixed tribal population
26	Jagatsinghpur	Mixed tribal population
27	Kendrapara	Mixed tribal population
28	Subarnapur	Gond, Binjhal
29	Bargarh	Binjhal, Gond
30	Nayagarh	Kondha, Bhuyan

APPENDIX-III

Major Tribal Languages of Odisha and Their Linguistic Affiliation

Sl. No.	Language	Language Family	Major Tribe(s)
1	Santali	Austroasiatic (Munda)	Santal
2	Ho	Austroasiatic (Munda)	Ho
3	Mundari	Austroasiatic (Munda)	Munda
4	Juang	Austroasiatic (Munda)	Juang
5	Sora (Saora)	Austroasiatic (Munda)	Saora, Lanjia Saora
6	Remo	Austroasiatic (Munda)	Bonda
7	Kui	Dravidian	Kondha (Kandha), Kutia Kondh
8	Kuvi	Dravidian	Dongria Kondh, Kutia Kondh
9	Gadaba (Ollari/Gutob varieties)	Dravidian	Gadaba
10	Parji	Dravidian	Paroja and related groups
11	Desia	Indo-Aryan contact language	Paroja and southern Odisha tribes
12	Bhatri	Indo-Aryan	Bhatra/Bhottada and neighboring communities
13	Odia	Indo-Aryan	Widely used as regional lingua franca among many tribes

APPENDIX-IV**Abbreviations and Acronyms Used in the Study**

Abbreviation	Full Form
ST	Scheduled Tribe
PVTG	Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group
SCSTRTI	Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute
MoTA	Ministry of Tribal Affairs
GoI	Government of India
GoO	Government of Odisha
Census	Census of India

UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
ICHR	Indian Council of Historical Research
UGC	University Grants Commission
UGC-CARE	UGC Consortium for Academic and Research Ethics
ISBN	International Standard Book Number
ISSN	International Standard Serial Number
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
GIS	Geographic Information System
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
OBC	Other Backward Classes
SC	Scheduled Caste
M.A.	Master of Arts
Ph.D.	Doctor of Philosophy