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WOMEN, CULTURE AND FESTIVALS: GENDER ROLES, PARTICIPATION AND CHANGING TRADITIONS IN INDIA

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Abstract

Women have historically played a central but often under-recognised role in the celebration and transmission of festivals in Indian families and communities. Their contribution extends beyond ritual participation to include food preparation, household management, decoration, maintaining family customs, arranging gatherings, caring for children and elders, and sustaining relationships among family members. Festivals can become important occasions through which women bring family members together despite everyday disagreements, tensions and emotional differences. At the same time, changing education, employment, urbanisation, technology and gender roles are transforming women's participation in festivals. This article examines the relationship between women, family, labour and cultural practices, with particular attention to the ways women combine domestic responsibilities with festival celebrations and contribute to family cohesion. Using a descriptive and exploratory approach, the article compares traditional and contemporary gender roles in festival practices. It argues that women's cultural labour is an important but frequently invisible component of family and community life. Festivals can provide women with opportunities for cultural leadership, relationship-building and intergenerational transmission, although the unequal distribution of domestic and festival-related work can also increase their workload.

Keywords: Women, festivals, gender roles, family, cultural practices, domestic labour, social cohesion, tradition, India.

1. Introduction

Festivals are important social institutions in Indian family and community life. They are occasions for religious observance, cultural expression, family gatherings, food, hospitality and the transmission of traditions from one generation to another.

Women have traditionally occupied a central position in this process. In many households, women

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prepare traditional food, clean and decorate homes, organise rituals, purchase festival materials, prepare clothing, invite relatives, care for children and elders, and ensure that customary practices are followed.

Much of this work is treated as part of ordinary household responsibility and therefore remains less visible than the public celebration itself. Yet without this everyday cultural labour, many family and community celebrations would be difficult to sustain.

Festivals also have an important emotional and social dimension. Families may experience disagreements, misunderstandings, distance or strained relationships during ordinary periods of life. However, festivals can create socially recognised opportunities to reconnect. Women often play a mediating and organising role in creating these opportunities.

The central concern of this article is therefore not simply **how women celebrate festivals**, but **how women use festival occasions to maintain family relationships, cultural continuity and social connection despite differences within families.**

2. Historical Role of Women in Festival Traditions

Historically, women were important transmitters of family and community traditions. Cultural knowledge was frequently passed from mothers and grandmothers to daughters and younger family members.

This knowledge included recipes, songs, rituals, stories, clothing practices, forms of decoration, methods of preparing offerings and ways of receiving guests.

Women also maintained connections between generations. Grandmothers and mothers introduced children to cultural practices, explained the meaning of rituals and encouraged participation in family celebrations.

Consequently, the history of festivals is also a history of women's cultural labour.

However, this contribution was often understood as an extension of domestic responsibility rather than recognised as a form of cultural work.

3. Research Methodology

The study adopted a **descriptive and exploratory research design** to understand women's roles in festival celebrations and the relationship between festivals, family relationships and cultural

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continuity.

A **qualitative and comparative approach** was used to examine traditional and contemporary practices. The analysis focused on four major dimensions:

1. women's domestic and festival-related labour;
2. women's role in maintaining cultural traditions;
3. women's contribution to family interaction and reconciliation; and
4. changes in women's participation resulting from education, employment, urbanisation and technology.

The study draws upon secondary literature, cultural studies and observation-based understanding of Indian family and festival practices. Particular attention was given to the often-unpaid and informal forms of work undertaken by women before, during and after festivals.

The analysis distinguishes between **visible participation**, such as attending rituals and public celebrations, and **invisible cultural labour**, such as planning, preparation, emotional support, caregiving and maintaining family relationships.

4. Women as the Organisers of Family Celebrations

For many families, the festival begins well before the actual celebration. Cleaning, shopping, preparing food, arranging decorations, planning rituals and contacting relatives require considerable time and effort.

Women frequently coordinate these activities.

A festival meal, for example, may involve planning the menu, purchasing ingredients, preparing food, serving family members and cleaning afterwards. Similarly, inviting relatives and organising family gatherings requires communication and emotional effort.

This means that women's contribution cannot be measured only by their presence during the festival. A substantial part of their participation occurs **before and after the visible celebration**.

5. Festivals and Family Relationships

One of the important social functions of festivals is their ability to create opportunities for family interaction.

Family relationships are not always free from disagreement. Differences between spouses,

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siblings, parents and children or between extended family members can arise because of financial issues, responsibilities, expectations or personal differences.

Festivals do not automatically eliminate these problems. However, they can create a socially accepted occasion for people to meet, exchange greetings, share food and spend time together.

Women can play an important role in creating such opportunities. A mother may encourage children to visit grandparents; a wife may invite relatives despite previous disagreements; a daughter may reconnect with her parental family; or a grandmother may bring younger and older generations together.

In this sense, festival participation can function as a form of **relationship maintenance**.

6. Beyond Hatred and Ill Feelings: The Social Meaning of Celebration

An important dimension of family festivals is the possibility of temporarily moving beyond everyday tensions.

This does not mean that festivals resolve serious conflicts or that women should be expected to tolerate injustice or suppress legitimate concerns. Rather, festivals can provide a social space in which family members choose to reconnect despite existing differences.

A greeting, shared meal, visit, gift or participation in a ritual can become a small act of social connection.

Women frequently contribute to these processes through emotional labour: encouraging communication, preparing a welcoming environment, remembering relatives, maintaining customary relationships and creating opportunities for interaction.

Thus, festival celebration can sometimes operate as a **bridge between people who have become emotionally distant**.

7. Women's Invisible Labour

The celebration visible to the public represents only one part of festival participation.

Behind a successful family celebration may be hours of unpaid work undertaken by women. This includes:

- cleaning and preparing the household;
- cooking traditional food;

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- purchasing festival materials;
- preparing clothing;
- organising rituals;
- decorating the home;
- caring for children and older persons;
- receiving guests;
- coordinating relatives;
- managing post-celebration cleaning; and
- maintaining cultural customs.

This labour has cultural and social value even when it does not receive direct economic compensation.

The recognition of such work is important because cultural continuity depends not only on formal institutions but also on everyday household practices.

8. Changing Gender Roles in Contemporary India

Women's festival roles are changing alongside broader social changes.

Women increasingly participate in education, paid employment, entrepreneurship, professional occupations and public life. As a result, they may have less time available for extensive festival preparation.

This has encouraged several changes. Families increasingly purchase prepared food, use professional decorators, share household responsibilities and use digital communication to organise gatherings.

These changes can reduce women's workload in some households. However, in other households, women continue to carry most domestic responsibilities while also managing employment outside the home.

The contemporary festival therefore presents a mixed picture: **women's public participation has increased, but the distribution of domestic and cultural labour may remain unequal.**

9. From Traditional Participation to Shared Participation

The changing festival environment also provides an opportunity to reconsider gender roles.

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Traditionally, certain festival responsibilities were often divided according to gender. Contemporary families increasingly involve men, women and young people jointly in cooking, shopping, decoration, travel and ritual preparation.

Children and adolescents can also participate in cultural activities, making festivals an opportunity for intergenerational learning.

The movement from **women's responsibility for the festival** toward **family responsibility for the festival** can make celebrations more inclusive and reduce unequal workloads.

10. Women as Cultural Transmitters

Women remain important cultural transmitters even when the methods of transmission are changing.

A grandmother may teach a traditional recipe directly to a granddaughter. A mother may explain the meaning of a ritual to her children. At the same time, younger women may document family traditions through photographs, videos and social media.

Digital technology has therefore created new possibilities for preserving and sharing women's cultural knowledge.

The transmission of culture is consequently moving from purely oral and household-based methods toward a combination of **family learning, community participation and digital documentation**.

11. Festivals as Spaces of Social Cohesion

Festivals can contribute to family and community cohesion by creating repeated opportunities for interaction.

For women, these occasions can involve maintaining relationships not only within the immediate household but also with parents, siblings, relatives, neighbours and community members.

A festival meal, family visit or collective celebration can strengthen social networks.

At the same time, it is important not to romanticise women's role. Women should not be expected to carry the responsibility for maintaining family harmony alone. Social cohesion is a shared responsibility involving all family members.

12. Traditional and Contemporary Women's Roles

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Traditional Pattern	Contemporary Pattern
Women primarily managed household preparation	Responsibilities increasingly shared within families
Cultural knowledge transmitted mainly through elders	Family learning combined with digital resources
Home-made festival food	Combination of home-made and purchased food
Extensive household decoration	Professional and ready-made decoration also used
Physical invitations and visits	Digital invitations and communication
Women-centred domestic labour	Increasing participation of men and youth
Family-based celebrations	Family celebrations combined with public and digital participation
Oral transmission of traditions	Oral, visual and digital transmission

The comparison shows that women's cultural role has not disappeared. Instead, the **form, visibility and organisation of their participation are changing**.

13. Social Relevance

Recognising women's role in festivals has broader social significance. It highlights the importance of unpaid care work, emotional labour and cultural transmission within families.

Festivals can provide opportunities for families to strengthen communication, maintain intergenerational relationships and pass cultural knowledge to younger generations.

However, meaningful participation requires that women are not burdened with the entire responsibility for celebration. Shared household work, recognition of women's contributions and greater participation by men and youth can make festival practices more equitable.

14. Conclusion

Women have played and continue to play a significant role in India's festival traditions. Their contribution extends far beyond participation in rituals. They prepare, organise, teach, care, communicate and often create the conditions through which families come together.

Festivals can become important occasions for reconnecting family members who may experience disagreements, distance or strained relationships during everyday life. A shared meal, greeting, visit or ritual cannot resolve every conflict, but it can create an opportunity for people to reconnect and maintain relationships.

The changing role of women demonstrates that tradition is not static. Women are adapting cultural practices to contemporary employment patterns, technology, education and changing family structures.

The future of festival culture therefore depends not on preserving women's traditional workload, but on **preserving the cultural knowledge and social values while sharing the responsibility for celebration more equally**.

Festivals can remain spaces of cultural continuity while also becoming spaces of mutual respect, shared responsibility and family connection. In this sense, women's contribution to festivals represents not only cultural labour but also an important form of **social relationship-building and intergenerational cultural continuity**.

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