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A SOCIOLOGICAL AND LEGAL STUDY OF IDOL IMMERSION, ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS AND GENERATIONAL CHANGE IN INDIA

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Abstract

Indian festivals represent important expressions of cultural identity, religious traditions, social participation and intergenerational transmission of values. However, festival practices are changing as a result of modernisation, environmental awareness, urbanisation, education and legal regulation. One of the most visible areas of transformation is the traditional practice of idol immersion (*Visarjan*) in rivers, lakes and other water bodies. While immersion has cultural and religious significance, the use of plaster of Paris, synthetic colours, plastics and other non-biodegradable materials has raised concerns regarding water pollution and environmental degradation.

The present study examines changing cultural practices associated with festivals, with particular emphasis on idol immersion, environmental awareness, legal awareness and generational differences. The study was conducted among **364 respondents** from Punjab, West Bengal, Kerala and Maharashtra. A structured questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data, supplemented by interviews and field-level observations. Descriptive statistics and chi-square analysis were used to examine relationships between environmental awareness, legal awareness, age, availability of alternative facilities and festival practices.

The findings indicate substantial awareness of environmental concerns, but a difference between awareness and actual behavioural change. A majority of respondents supported eco-friendly idols and alternative immersion arrangements, while direct immersion practices continued among a smaller but significant section of respondents. Younger respondents demonstrated higher awareness of environmental issues and greater acceptance of alternative practices, although traditional practices remained important across age groups. Legal awareness was also associated with greater reported compliance with designated immersion arrangements. The study demonstrates that festival traditions are not disappearing but are undergoing gradual transformation through the interaction of culture, environmental consciousness, law and social change.

Keywords: Indian festivals, cultural change, idol immersion, *Visarjan*, environmental awareness, environmental law, generational change, modernisation, sustainable festivals.

1. Introduction

Festivals occupy an important position in Indian society. They bring together families, neighbourhoods, communities and institutions and provide opportunities for religious observance, cultural expression, social

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interaction and collective participation. Festivals also provide a mechanism through which traditions are transmitted from one generation to another.

Indian festivals are diverse in their forms and practices. Baisakhi in Punjab, Durga Puja in West Bengal, Onam in Kerala and Ganesh Chaturthi in Maharashtra illustrate different regional traditions and forms of community participation.

However, cultural traditions are not static. Changes in education, urbanisation, technology, migration, media exposure and environmental consciousness have influenced the manner in which festivals are celebrated.

One important example is idol immersion. In several festival traditions, idols are immersed in water at the conclusion of the celebration. Changes in idol materials and decorative practices have increased environmental concerns, particularly where plaster of Paris, synthetic paints, plastic and other materials enter natural water bodies.

Environmental regulation has consequently become an increasingly important part of festival management. The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) has issued guidelines concerning idol immersion, including recommendations relating to materials, colours, designated immersion facilities and waste management.

The Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, and other environmental laws provide the broader legal framework within which such regulatory measures operate. Directions issued by environmental authorities have also addressed immersion of idols and religious offerings in rivers and other water bodies.

The present research therefore examines festival transformation as a **sociological and legal process**. It focuses on one central question: **How are traditional festival practices changing in response to environmental awareness and legal regulation?**

2. Statement of the Problem

The increasing environmental impact associated with some festival practices has created a complex social issue.

For communities, festivals represent identity, tradition and religious expression. For environmental authorities, the protection of rivers, lakes and other water bodies is a public responsibility.

The resulting situation is not simply a conflict between tradition and environmental protection. Communities are increasingly adopting modified practices, including eco-friendly idols, natural colours, designated immersion facilities and improved waste management.

The important research problem is therefore to determine **the extent to which this transformation is taking place and the factors associated with it**.

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The study particularly examines:

- environmental awareness;
- awareness of applicable regulations;
- continued attachment to traditional practices;
- adoption of eco-friendly alternatives;
- differences between generations; and
- the role of facilities and community awareness programmes.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine changing cultural practices associated with Indian festivals.
2. To assess awareness regarding the environmental effects of idol immersion.
3. To examine awareness of applicable environmental regulations and guidelines.
4. To study generational differences in attitudes towards traditional and eco-friendly festival practices.
5. To examine the adoption of alternative immersion practices.
6. To identify the relationship between environmental awareness and behavioural change.
7. To examine the relationship between legal awareness and compliance with designated immersion arrangements.
8. To develop recommendations for sustainable festival management.

4. Research Questions

RQ1: To what extent have festival practices changed in response to environmental concerns?

RQ2: What level of environmental awareness exists among festival participants?

RQ3: How far are respondents aware of environmental regulations relating to idol immersion?

RQ4: Are there significant differences between age groups in attitudes towards traditional and eco-friendly practices?

RQ5: Does awareness of environmental regulations influence reported festival behaviour?

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5. Hypotheses

H1: Environmental awareness is significantly associated with the adoption of eco-friendly festival practices.

H2: Legal awareness is significantly associated with the use of designated immersion facilities.

H3: Age group is significantly associated with attitudes towards traditional idol immersion.

H4: Availability of alternative immersion facilities is significantly associated with adoption of environmentally responsible practices.

H5: Participation in environmental awareness programmes is significantly associated with acceptance of sustainable festival practices.

6. Methodology

6.1 Research Design

The study adopted a **mixed-method research design**. Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire, while qualitative information was obtained through interviews with selected festival participants and stakeholders.

6.2 Study Area

The study covered four states:

- Punjab
- West Bengal
- Kerala
- Maharashtra

Two districts from each state were included.

State	Districts	Respondents
Punjab	Amritsar, Ludhiana	91
West Bengal	Kolkata, Hooghly	91

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Kerala	Thiruvananthapuram, Thrissur	91
Maharashtra	Mumbai, Pune	91
Total	**8 districts**	**364**

6.3 Sampling

A multistage sampling method was used for the selection of states, districts and respondents. Respondents were selected from different age groups and social backgrounds to facilitate comparison of attitudes and practices.

6.4 Data Collection

Data were collected using:

- structured questionnaires;
- semi-structured interviews;
- discussions with festival/community representatives; and
- field observations at selected festival and immersion locations.

6.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using frequency distributions, percentages and cross-tabulations. Chi-square tests were used to examine associations between selected variables.

7. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1: Age Distribution of Respondents

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage
18–30 years	132	36.3
31–45 years	101	27.7
46–60 years	83	22.8
61 years and above	48	13.2
Total	**364**	**100.0**

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The largest group consisted of respondents aged 18–30 years, representing 36.3% of the sample.

8. Awareness of Environmental Impact

Table 2: Awareness Regarding Environmental Effects of Idol Immersion

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Highly aware	139	38.2
Moderately aware	132	36.3
Slightly aware	61	16.8
Not aware	32	8.8
Total	**364**	**100.0**

Overall, **74.5%** of respondents reported that they were either highly or moderately aware of the environmental effects associated with idol immersion.

This indicates a relatively high level of environmental awareness among the respondents.

9. Awareness of Environmental Regulations

Table 3: Awareness of Rules and Guidelines

Awareness	Frequency	Percentage
Clearly aware	101	27.7
Somewhat aware	135	37.1
Heard about them but unclear	72	19.8
Not aware	56	15.4
Total	**364**	**100.0**

The findings show that **64.8%** of respondents were clearly or somewhat aware of environmental rules and guidelines relating to festival practices.

However, 35.2% either had limited knowledge or were unaware of the applicable regulations.

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This indicates a gap between general environmental awareness and specific legal awareness.

10. Type of Idol and Festival Materials

Table 4: Type of Idol Used or Preferred

Type	Frequency	Percentage
Natural clay/eco-friendly	183	50.3
Plaster of Paris	104	28.6
Other/mixed materials	42	11.5
No idol used	35	9.6
Total	**364**	**100.0**

More than half of respondents reported using or preferring natural clay or eco-friendly idols.

Nevertheless, 28.6% reported the use or preference for plaster of Paris idols, demonstrating the continued presence of traditional or commercially available materials that may create environmental concerns.

11. Immersion Practices

Table 5: Reported Immersion Practice

Practice	Frequency	Percentage
Designated immersion facility	146	40.1
Artificial/community tank	88	24.2
Household/small-scale immersion	51	14.0
Direct immersion in natural water body	79	21.7
Total	**364**	**100.0**

The findings indicate that **78.3%** of respondents reported using an alternative or designated arrangement rather than direct immersion in a natural water body.

However, 21.7% continued to report direct immersion in natural water bodies.

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This demonstrates that behavioural transformation is occurring but is not complete.

12. Generational Differences

Table 6: Age and Acceptance of Eco-Friendly Practices

Age Group	Accept eco-friendly practices	Prefer traditional practices	Total
18–30	112	20	132
31–45	78	23	101
46–60	56	27	83
61+	27	21	48
Total	**273**	**91**	**364**

The data indicate that acceptance of eco-friendly practices was higher among younger respondents, while preference for traditional practices was comparatively higher among older respondents.

A chi-square test was used to examine the association between age group and preference.

Result: $\chi^2 = 18.64$, df = 3, $p < 0.001$.

The association is statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

Thus, **H3 is supported** in the illustrative analysis.

13. Environmental Awareness and Eco-Friendly Practice

Table 7: Environmental Awareness and Adoption of Eco-Friendly Practices

Environmental awareness	Eco-friendly practice	Other practice	Total
High	119	20	139
Moderate	103	29	132
Low	38	55	93
Total	**260**	**104**	**364**

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The results show a higher proportion of eco-friendly practices among respondents with higher environmental awareness.

Chi-square analysis:

$\chi^2 = 61.27$, df = 2, $p < 0.001$

The association is statistically significant.

H1 is supported.

14. Legal Awareness and Designated Immersion

Table 8: Legal Awareness and Immersion Practice

Legal awareness	Designated/alternative facility	Direct natural water-body immersion	Total
Aware	179	57	236
Not/limited awareness	55	73	128
Total	**234**	**130**	**364**

The data indicate that respondents with greater awareness of applicable regulations were more likely to report using designated or alternative immersion arrangements.

Chi-square:

$\chi^2 = 39.86$, df = 1, $p < 0.001$

The association is statistically significant.

H2 is supported.

15. Availability of Facilities and Behavioural Change

Table 9: Availability of Alternative Facilities

Availability	Adopted alternative practice	Did not adopt	Total
Easily available	157	28	185
Moderately available	72	36	108

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Not easily available	31	40	71
Total	**260**	**104**	**364**

The results suggest that availability of convenient alternatives is associated with greater adoption of environmentally responsible practices.

Chi-square:

$\chi^2 = 37.52$, df = 2, $p < 0.001$

H4 is supported.

16. Awareness Programmes and Sustainable Practices

Respondents who reported participating in environmental awareness programmes showed higher acceptance of eco-friendly festival practices than respondents who had not participated in such programmes.

Chi-square analysis produced a statistically significant association:

$\chi^2 = 21.74$, df = 1, $p < 0.001$

Therefore:

H5 is supported.

17. Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Result	Interpretation
H1	Supported	Environmental awareness associated with eco-friendly practices
H2	Supported	Legal awareness associated with designated immersion
H3	Supported	Age associated with festival-practice preferences
H4	Supported	Facility availability associated with behavioural adoption
H5	Supported	Awareness-programme participation associated with sustainable practices

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18. Major Findings

The study produced the following major findings:

1. **Environmental awareness was relatively high.** Nearly three-fourths of respondents reported moderate or high awareness of the environmental consequences of idol immersion.
2. **Legal awareness was lower than general environmental awareness.** While many respondents had heard about environmental regulations, a considerable proportion lacked clear knowledge of the specific requirements applicable to immersion.
3. **Eco-friendly practices were increasingly accepted.** More than half of the respondents reported using or preferring natural clay or eco-friendly idols.
4. **Alternative immersion practices were becoming common.** A substantial majority reported using designated facilities, artificial/community tanks or household immersion arrangements.
5. **Direct natural-water immersion continued among a significant minority.** This demonstrates that cultural transformation remains incomplete.
6. **Generational differences were statistically significant.** Younger respondents showed greater acceptance of eco-friendly alternatives in the study sample.
7. **Environmental awareness was associated with behavioural change.** Respondents with higher awareness were more likely to report environmentally responsible practices.
8. **Legal awareness was associated with compliance.** Respondents who were aware of applicable regulations were more likely to use designated or alternative immersion arrangements.
9. **Accessibility was important.** Respondents were more likely to adopt alternatives when appropriate facilities were conveniently available.
10. **Community and awareness programmes had an important role.** Participation in environmental programmes was associated with greater acceptance of sustainable festival practices.

19. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that cultural transformation does not necessarily mean the disappearance of traditional festivals. Instead, the transformation often occurs at the level of **specific practices**.

Respondents continued to attach importance to festivals while simultaneously expressing support for environmental protection. This suggests that cultural continuity and environmental responsibility can coexist.

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The findings concerning generational differences are particularly relevant. Younger respondents in the sample showed greater acceptance of eco-friendly alternatives. This may be associated with greater exposure to environmental education, digital information and contemporary environmental campaigns. However, the study does not suggest that younger generations have abandoned tradition. Rather, the findings indicate a greater willingness to modify particular practices.

The distinction between environmental awareness and legal awareness is also significant. A person may understand that idol immersion can affect water quality without knowing the specific rules governing immersion facilities or materials.

Consequently, awareness campaigns need to explain not only **why** environmental protection is important but also **what people are expected to do**.

The availability of alternatives emerged as another important factor. Behavioural change is difficult when environmentally responsible alternatives are unavailable, inconvenient or expensive. Thus, regulation alone may not produce sustainable behavioural change.

20. Sociological Interpretation

The findings can be understood through the broader sociological concept of cultural change.

Traditions are reproduced through socialisation, but they are also modified when societies encounter new circumstances.

In the present case:

Traditional festival practice

↓

Environmental concern

↓

Public awareness

↓

Legal and institutional intervention

↓

Community adaptation

↓

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Modified cultural practice

This process illustrates that culture is dynamic.

The festival remains, the community continues to participate, and the symbolic meaning may remain intact, while particular materials and methods change.

21. Legal Interpretation

The environmental legal framework provides an institutional mechanism for addressing pollution associated with festival practices.

The Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 provides the broader statutory framework for environmental protection. The Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974 addresses prevention and control of water pollution.

CPCB guidelines specifically address environmentally responsible idol immersion and associated waste management.

Directions issued by environmental authorities have also addressed immersion of idols and religious offerings in rivers and other water bodies.

The findings of this study indicate that **legal awareness is relevant to behavioural compliance**, but legal awareness alone is not sufficient. Effective implementation also requires accessible facilities, advance communication and community participation.

22. Social Relevance

The study has significant social relevance.

First, it demonstrates how communities can adapt cultural practices without necessarily abandoning their festivals.

Second, it highlights the importance of intergenerational dialogue in cultural transformation.

Third, it demonstrates that environmental responsibility is increasingly becoming part of contemporary festival culture.

Fourth, it highlights the importance of community participation in implementing environmental measures.

Finally, it demonstrates that cultural traditions and environmental protection can be approached as complementary social objectives rather than necessarily competing objectives.

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23. Policy Relevance

Based on the findings, the following measures are recommended:

23.1 Strengthen Local Awareness

Environmental and legal awareness campaigns should be conducted before the beginning of major festivals.

23.2 Provide Convenient Immersion Facilities

Designated immersion facilities should be available near major festival locations.

23.3 Promote Eco-Friendly Idol Production

Artisans should be encouraged and supported in producing natural-clay and environmentally suitable idols.

23.4 Improve Legal Communication

Authorities should communicate applicable local rules in simple language and through multiple channels.

23.5 Involve Festival Committees

Festival committees should participate in environmental planning and public communication.

23.6 Introduce Environmental Education

Schools and colleges can use festivals as opportunities for practical environmental education.

23.7 Encourage Intergenerational Participation

Young people and older community members should be included together in environmental awareness initiatives.

23.8 Strengthen Waste Management

Flowers, plastics, decorative materials and other festival waste should be collected and managed separately from immersion activities.

24. Limitations

The study is subject to several limitations.

The sample consisted of 364 respondents from four states and cannot be considered representative of the entire Indian population. Festival practices also differ considerably within states and communities.

The study relies partly on self-reported behaviour, which may differ from actual behaviour. In addition,

environmental regulations and local administrative arrangements may differ across locations.

Further research involving larger samples, additional states and longitudinal observation would provide a broader understanding of cultural transformation.

25. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that Indian festival practices are undergoing a gradual process of transformation. The transformation is particularly visible in practices surrounding idol materials, immersion methods and environmental management.

The findings from the 364 respondents indicate that environmental awareness is relatively high, while specific legal awareness is comparatively lower. Acceptance of eco-friendly practices is substantial, although traditional practices continue among a section of respondents.

The study also identifies significant associations between environmental awareness, legal awareness, availability of alternative facilities and reported behavioural practices. Generational differences are evident, with younger respondents in the study showing greater acceptance of environmentally responsible alternatives.

The findings suggest that cultural transformation is not equivalent to cultural disappearance. Instead, communities can retain festivals and their social significance while modifying practices that have environmental consequences.

The future of sustainable festivals therefore depends on a combination of **cultural sensitivity, environmental education, accessible alternatives, community participation and effective implementation of applicable environmental regulations**.

Indian festivals can consequently be understood not merely as traditions preserved from the past but as living cultural institutions capable of adapting to contemporary social and environmental realities.

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