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FROM OLD TRADITION TO NEW TRADITION: CHANGING CULTURAL PRACTICES AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF INDIAN FESTIVALS

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Abstract

Indian festivals have historically served as important spaces for religious observance, community interaction, cultural transmission and intergenerational learning. Traditionally, festivals were largely organized around families, neighbourhoods and local communities, with practices transmitted orally from elders to younger generations. Over time, urbanisation, education, migration, technology, commercialization, changing lifestyles and social media have transformed the way festivals are celebrated. The transformation is visible in clothing, food, music, decorations, rituals, methods of communication, community participation and the increasing use of digital platforms. This article examines the transition from traditional festival practices to contemporary forms of celebration and explores whether these changes represent cultural decline, cultural adaptation or the emergence of new traditions. The study adopts a descriptive and exploratory approach based on secondary literature, cultural observation and comparative analysis of traditional and contemporary festival practices. It argues that cultural change does not necessarily mean the disappearance of tradition. Rather, many Indian festivals demonstrate a process of continuity, adaptation and selective transformation in which older practices coexist with new forms of cultural expression.

Keywords: Indian festivals, tradition, cultural change, modernization, youth, social media, cultural continuity, new traditions.

1. Introduction

Festivals occupy an important place in the social and cultural history of India. For generations, festivals have provided opportunities for families and communities to come together, perform rituals, prepare traditional food, wear customary clothing, participate in music and dance, visit relatives and pass cultural knowledge from one generation to another.

Traditional cultural practices were generally learned through direct participation. Children observed parents and grandparents, learned rituals within families and participated in community celebrations. Oral traditions, folk performances, traditional crafts and religious practices were important mechanisms through which cultural knowledge was maintained.

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However, Indian society has experienced substantial social transformation. Urbanisation, migration, formal education, changing occupations, mass media, digital technology, global cultural exposure and changing consumer behaviour have altered the context in which festivals are celebrated.

The contemporary festival is therefore different from the festival experienced by previous generations. Yet this difference should not automatically be understood as the disappearance of culture. UNESCO describes intangible cultural heritage as living heritage that is transmitted between generations while also being recreated in response to changing social and environmental circumstances.

The central question of this study is therefore: How have Indian festival traditions changed from older forms to contemporary forms, and does this transformation represent cultural loss, cultural adaptation or the creation of new traditions?

2. Historical Perspective: Festivals as Community Traditions

Historically, festivals were closely connected with agricultural cycles, religious beliefs, seasonal changes, local occupations and community life. Many celebrations were organised at the household or village level.

Traditional festivals involved locally available materials, handmade decorations, regional food, folk music, community participation and customary rituals. Knowledge about these practices was largely transmitted through families and communities.

This intergenerational transmission was not limited to religious rituals. It included traditional cooking, clothing, crafts, songs, dances, storytelling, decoration and methods of community organisation.

India's cultural heritage continues to include numerous traditions that demonstrate this long process of transmission. UNESCO's Indian intangible cultural heritage listings include traditions such as Durga Puja in Kolkata, Garba of Gujarat, Kumbh Mela, Ramlila, Chhau, Kalbelia and the tradition of Vedic chanting.

Thus, the history of Indian festivals is also a history of social learning and cultural continuity.

3. Research Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive and exploratory research design to examine the transformation of festival practices from traditional forms to contemporary forms.

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A qualitative and comparative approach was used. The study compared older and contemporary practices across major areas including rituals, clothing, food, music, decoration, community participation, communication, technology and commercialisation.

The study relied on secondary literature, published research, cultural documentation and observation-based understanding of festival practices. Academic studies concerning cultural change, youth, digital media and Indian traditions were also examined.

The analysis was organised around four major dimensions:

1. Continuity – practices that continue substantially in contemporary celebrations;
2. Modification – traditional practices that have changed in form or method;
3. Replacement – practices that have declined and have been replaced by newer forms; and
4. Innovation – new practices that have emerged alongside traditional celebrations.

The study does not treat "old" and "new" as completely separate categories. Instead, it examines how traditional and contemporary practices interact and coexist.

4. From Traditional Festivals to Contemporary Celebrations

One of the most visible changes is the movement from predominantly family- and community-centred celebrations toward larger, more organised and publicly visible celebrations.

Earlier, many celebrations were conducted primarily within homes, temples, villages and neighbourhoods. Today, festivals may involve large public events, professional event management, amplified music, commercial sponsorship, organised competitions and digital promotion.

The physical scale of festivals has therefore changed. In many places, the festival has become both a cultural event and a public social event.

This transformation is particularly visible in urban India, where traditional festivals have adapted to limited living space, busy occupations, migration and changing patterns of community interaction.

5. Traditional Rituals and New Forms of Practice

Traditional rituals remain important, but the way they are performed can change.

For example, some families may continue traditional prayers and ceremonies while reducing the

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duration or number of rituals because of work schedules and urban lifestyles. In other cases, rituals may be conducted with the assistance of digital communication or online resources.

Similarly, traditional festival preparation that once required extensive household participation may increasingly involve purchased or professionally prepared goods and services.

The result is not necessarily complete abandonment. Instead, there is often selective retention: certain rituals considered central to family or cultural identity are maintained, while other practices are simplified or modified.

Recent research on cultural transformation among Indian youth similarly points toward selective adaptation rather than a simple disappearance of tradition.

6. From Oral Tradition to Digital Tradition

One of the most significant differences between older and contemporary festival cultures is the method of cultural communication.

Earlier generations primarily learned festival traditions from parents, grandparents, community elders, religious institutions and local cultural groups. Today, young people can also learn about traditions through YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, messaging platforms and other digital sources.

Social media has transformed festivals into highly visible digital events. Festival photographs, videos, greetings, recipes, traditional clothing, decorations and performances can be shared instantly.

This creates a new form of cultural participation: digital participation.

The younger generation may therefore participate in a tradition both physically and digitally. A festival can be celebrated at home or in the community while simultaneously being represented online.

Research on Indian youth has identified both continuity and change in cultural engagement, while studies of new media among Indian communities have also documented concerns about cultural disconnection in some contexts.

7. From Handmade to Market-Based Culture

Traditional festivals were strongly connected with local production. Families and communities often prepared decorations, food, clothing and other materials themselves or obtained them from local artisans.

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Contemporary celebrations increasingly involve commercially produced goods, professional decorators, event managers, branded clothing, packaged food and ready-made decorations.

This has created both opportunities and challenges.

On one hand, commercialization can provide income to artisans, vendors, designers, food producers and small businesses. On the other hand, mass-produced goods can reduce demand for some traditional handmade products.

The festival marketplace has therefore become an important space where tradition interacts with modern consumer culture.

8. Changing Role of Youth

Youth are central to the transformation of festival culture.

Young people may continue to participate in traditional ceremonies while simultaneously introducing new music, fashion, technology, photography, social media content and event formats.

The role of youth is therefore not simply that of passive recipients of tradition. They increasingly act as interpreters and transmitters of culture.

A young person may wear traditional clothing but style it differently, participate in a traditional dance while recording it for social media, or learn a traditional recipe through a digital platform rather than directly from an elder.

This suggests that cultural transmission is changing from a primarily one-directional process—from elders to youth—to a more interactive process involving family, community, education, media and digital technology.

9. Old Tradition, New Tradition and Cultural Hybridisation

The distinction between old and new traditions is not always clear.

Many contemporary practices combine traditional cultural symbols with modern technology and lifestyles. A traditional festival may therefore include ancient rituals, modern lighting, digital invitations, social-media campaigns, contemporary music and professional event management within the same celebration.

This can be described as cultural hybridisation, where older and newer cultural elements interact.

The emergence of such hybrid practices does not necessarily mean that the original tradition has disappeared. Instead, the tradition may acquire a new form suited to contemporary social

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conditions.

UNESCO similarly recognises intangible cultural heritage as simultaneously traditional, contemporary and living, with communities adapting practices while maintaining a sense of identity and continuity.

10. Cultural Change: Loss or Transformation?

The question of whether modern festival practices represent cultural loss requires careful consideration.

Some traditional practices have clearly declined. Local languages, folk performances, handmade crafts, traditional games and certain household rituals may receive less attention in some communities.

At the same time, other traditions have gained new visibility through tourism, cultural festivals, educational programmes and digital media.

For example, UNESCO's recognition of Indian traditions such as Durga Puja in Kolkata and Garba of Gujarat demonstrates that traditional cultural practices can remain socially significant while existing within contemporary cultural environments.

Therefore, cultural transformation should not be measured only by whether a practice remains exactly the same. It should also be examined in terms of whether its meaning, knowledge, symbols and social connections continue in a new form.

11. Major Areas of Transformation

Traditional Practice	Contemporary Transformation
Oral transmission through elders	Digital learning and social media
Handmade decorations	Commercial and professionally designed decorations
Local community celebrations	Large organised public events
Traditional clothing	Traditional clothing with contemporary styles
Home-prepared food	Combination of traditional and commercially prepared food
Folk music and local performances	Combination of folk, popular and digital entertainment

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Handwritten invitations	Digital invitations and social-media communication
Local markets	Online and offline festival markets
Family-centred participation	Family, community and digital participation
Traditional publicity	Social-media campaigns and digital promotion

The table demonstrates that cultural transformation is occurring across multiple dimensions rather than through the complete replacement of old practices.

12. Social Significance of the Transformation

The transformation of festival practices has important implications for social cohesion and cultural identity.

Traditional festivals continue to connect generations, families and communities. Contemporary forms can additionally connect geographically dispersed relatives and communities through digital communication.

However, there is a need to maintain meaningful cultural knowledge rather than reducing festivals entirely to entertainment and consumption.

Schools, colleges, cultural organisations and community institutions can play an important role by documenting local traditions, encouraging intergenerational storytelling, supporting traditional artists and providing opportunities for young people to learn cultural practices.

Digital technology can be used as a tool for preservation rather than only as a mechanism for changing cultural practices.

13. Conclusion

The journey from old tradition to new tradition in India is not simply a movement from tradition to modernity. It is a continuous process of cultural adaptation.

Traditional festivals remain important sources of identity, family connection and community participation. At the same time, urbanisation, education, migration, commercialization, changing lifestyles and digital technology have transformed how these festivals are experienced.

The contemporary festival often contains both the old and the new: traditional rituals alongside digital communication, local food alongside commercial products, traditional clothing alongside modern fashion, and community participation alongside online participation.

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The central finding of this study is that tradition does not necessarily disappear when it changes. In many cases, it is modified, reinterpreted and transmitted through new social and technological forms.

The challenge for contemporary society is therefore not to prevent cultural change but to ensure that modernization does not result in the loss of cultural knowledge, community participation and meaningful intergenerational transmission.

The future of Indian festivals may consequently be understood as a continuum from inherited tradition to adapted tradition and emerging new tradition. Preserving this continuum requires active participation by families, youth, educational institutions, cultural organisations and communities.

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