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Community-Specific Festivals and Traditional Knowledge in Odisha: A Study of Cultural Documentation and Preservation

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ABSTRACT

Odisha's cultural diversity is reflected not only in widely recognised celebrations but also in community-specific festivals that connect ritual practices, agricultural knowledge, spirituality, social relationships, and collective identity. These festivals can provide settings for the transmission of traditional knowledge across generations, yet their significance cannot be fully understood through descriptions of ceremonies alone. This article examines selected festivals in Odisha, focusing on Burlang Yatra, Nuakhai, and Bhai Jiuntia. It adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach based on secondary sources, including academic publications on festivals, folklore, oral tradition, and cultural documentation. The analysis identifies connections between festivals, environmental knowledge, agrarian practices, kinship, spirituality, and cultural transmission. It also considers the limitations of documenting festivals without sufficient attention to local context and community participation. Based on the reviewed literature, the article proposes a community-centred framework that incorporates identification, ritual practices, traditional knowledge, social relationships, intergenerational transmission, and ethical access. The study argues that responsible documentation should recognise festivals as living cultural practices rather than isolated events. As a secondary-source study, it offers an analytical framework for future research and does not claim to provide comprehensive empirical documentation of all community festivals in Odisha.

Keywords: Community Festivals; Traditional Knowledge; Odisha; Folklore; Cultural Documentation; Intergenerational Transmission

1. Introduction

Festivals occupy an important place in the cultural life of Odisha. They bring together religious beliefs, seasonal practices, agricultural activities, family relationships, artistic expressions, and community participation. Their significance extends beyond the dates on which they are celebrated. In many contexts, festivals connect people with the natural environment, reinforce social relationships, express local histories, and provide opportunities for the continuation of knowledge inherited from earlier generations.

Public understanding of Odisha's festivals is often shaped by widely recognised celebrations and major religious events. These festivals are important expressions of the state's cultural identity, but they do not represent the entire range of its cultural diversity. Community-specific festivals may be associated with particular regions, settlements, Indigenous communities, agricultural practices, occupational groups, or local ritual traditions. Their meanings are frequently embedded in everyday life and may not be fully explained by general descriptions of religious ceremonies or public celebrations.

Traditional knowledge is transmitted through more than written texts and formal instruction. It may be expressed through seed selection, agricultural practices, food preparation, seasonal observations, ritual activities, oral narratives, music, and collective participation. Festivals can provide occasions for such knowledge to be practised, shared, and renewed. Their cultural value therefore, lies not only in the activities performed during a celebration but also in the knowledge, relationships, memories, and beliefs that give those activities meaning.

The relationship between festivals and traditional knowledge can be examined through scholarship on living cultural practices, community identity, and intangible heritage. Del Barrio et al. (2012) discuss the value of cultural festivals as expressions of group identity and tradition, while Blake (2019) analyzes the importance and challenges of community participation in heritage safeguarding. These perspectives support an approach that considers not only the visible event but also the relationships and meanings through which cultural practices are maintained. Festivals may involve several overlapping domains, including ritual, oral tradition, performance, and knowledge concerning the natural environment.

The study of Burlang Yatra provides a clear example of this relationship. Saxena (2020) examines the festival in Kandhamal district in connection with

Indigenous seed exchange, millet cultivation, community self-organisation, and social-ecological relationships. Her study illustrates how a community festival can be associated with agricultural knowledge and the circulation of traditional seeds. Similarly, Kesavan (2024/2025) examines Nuakhai and Bhai Jiuntia in western Odisha, highlighting their connections with rice culture, kinship, ritual practice, and gendered social relationships. These studies demonstrate that festivals can express multiple dimensions of community life.

Nevertheless, documenting festivals presents several challenges. A record may identify a festival's name, location, date, and ritual sequence without adequately explaining its historical, agricultural, social, or spiritual context. Broad descriptions may also overlook differences between communities or assume that similar practices have identical meanings. Documentation can consequently become incomplete when a tradition is represented primarily as a spectacle rather than as part of a living knowledge system.

The present article addresses this issue by examining selected published studies of community-specific festivals in Odisha and considering their implications for cultural documentation. Its objectives are to analyse the relationship between festivals and traditional knowledge, examine their social and ecological dimensions, identify considerations for responsible documentation, and propose a community-centred framework for future research. The article does not attempt to catalogue every community festival in Odisha. Instead, it uses selected examples to develop an analytical discussion of festivals as living cultural practices.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Festivals, Folklore, and Community Meaning

Scholarship on folklore has long emphasised that cultural traditions perform social and communicative functions rather than serving only as entertainment. Bascom (1954) identified several functions of folklore, including its role in validating cultural practices and educating members of a community. Bauman (1975) similarly argues for understanding verbal art through performance and its social context rather than treating it as text detached from the event in which it is performed. These perspectives are relevant to community festivals, where stories, songs, ritual speech, music, and collective actions may carry meanings that become visible through participation.

Research on Odisha provides more specific examples of these relationships. Bag (2020) examines folktales of western Odisha, contributing to the study of regional oral traditions and their cultural settings. Pradhan and Goswami (2025) analyse spiritual dimensions in selected forms of Odishan folklore, including seasonal and agrarian festivals, performing arts, visual traditions, and narratives. Majhi (2025) discusses the cultural and religious significance of selected Odia festivals and their relationship with agrarian life and community bonding. Although these studies differ in scope, they demonstrate that festivals and folklore can be examined as interconnected expressions of social memory, belief, and cultural identity.

2.2 Agricultural Festivals and Traditional Knowledge

Saxena (2020) offers a detailed social-ecological analysis of Burlang Yatra, an Indigenous community seed festival in Kandhamal district. The article describes how millet farmers gather to exchange Indigenous heirloom seeds and share farming knowledge. It interprets the festival as a setting for social learning, relationships, adaptation, and responsibility, linking agricultural practices with community life. This study is especially relevant to the present article because it demonstrates that festival documentation can reveal environmental knowledge and collective practices that may be overlooked by descriptions limited to ceremony.

Kesavan (2024/2025) examines Nuakhai and Bhai Jiuntia in western Odisha in relation to rice culture, kinship, and gendered social relationships. Satpathy et al. (2022) also discuss Nuakhai as an agricultural and religious festival, considering its rituals, history, community relationships, and potential for tourism. These studies approach Nuakhai from different angles: one focuses on kinship and rice culture, while the other considers the festival's broader cultural and religious significance. Their findings should not be treated as interchangeable, but together they show that festivals may connect agricultural produce with social relationships and ritual meanings.

2.3 Documentation, Performance, and Community Participation

Documentation of oral and performative traditions requires attention to more than the content of a story or the sequence of a ritual. Kutin (2007) examines the roles of participants in storytelling events, highlighting the interactive character of oral performance. Abu Bakar et al. (2024) discuss procedures and challenges in documenting oral traditions, including the need to record forms, language, structure, and other features rather than preserving content alone. These insights are useful for festival documentation, where songs, oral explanations, performance roles, and community interaction may be central to meaning.

The broader study of cultural festivals also highlights the importance of context and participation. Del Barrio et al. (2012) examine cultural festivals as expressions of identity and tradition, while Blake (2019) considers the practical challenges of involving communities in heritage-related decisions. Taken together, this literature suggests that documentation should record both cultural practices and the conditions under which communities interpret, maintain, and adapt them. The present article builds on these ideas by proposing a framework that combines cultural description with attention to knowledge transmission and ethical representation.

2.4 Research Gap

The literature reviewed here demonstrates that community festivals and related traditions in Odisha have been examined from perspectives including agricultural knowledge, kinship, spirituality, folklore, and cultural identity. The present article does not claim that these traditions have never been studied. Instead, it identifies an analytical need to bring these perspectives together in a focused discussion of community-specific festivals and the practical considerations involved in documenting them. The central issue is how documentation can move beyond descriptions of visible celebrations to explain their social, ecological, and cultural contexts while respecting community participation. This focus informs the objectives and methodology of the present study.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach based exclusively on secondary sources. It examines published academic literature on festivals, folklore, oral traditions, cultural documentation, and community participation to explore the relationship between community-specific festivals and traditional knowledge in Odisha. The principal Odisha-focused sources include Saxena (2020), Kesavan (2024/2025), Pradhan and Goswami (2025), Satpathy et al. (2022), Bag (2020), and Majhi (2025). Conceptual sources on folklore, performance, documentation, and community participation include Bascom (1954), Bauman (1975), Kutin (2007), Abu Bakar et al. (2024), Del Barrio et al. (2012), and Blake (2019).

3.2 Source Selection and Thematic Analysis

The sources were selected purposively for their direct relevance to one or more of the article's themes. The material was examined in relation to four areas: (i) the relationship between festivals and agricultural or ecological knowledge; (ii) connections between ritual practice, spirituality, and social relationships; (iii) the transmission and recreation of cultural knowledge across generations; and (iv) the documentation and ethical representation of community traditions. The literature was interpreted comparatively to identify common concerns and differences among the selected examples. This was a thematic reading of selected publications, not a systematic review of all available literature.

3.3 Scope and Limitations

The study does not include original interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, or field observations. It does not claim to present firsthand accounts from festival participants or to measure the current condition of all community-specific festivals in Odisha. Its findings are limited to the published material examined and the analysis developed from that material. The selected examples are illustrative rather than comprehensive. The proposed documentation framework is an analytical recommendation derived from the reviewed literature; it has not been empirically tested through original fieldwork. Further community-based research would be needed to assess its practical application across different locations and traditions.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Festivals as Expressions of Living Cultural Knowledge

The reviewed literature indicates that festivals can be understood as settings in which cultural knowledge, social relationships, and collective identities are expressed. Their significance is not limited to visible activities such as rituals, food preparation, music, dance, or communal gatherings. These activities may also communicate inherited beliefs, practical skills, shared memories, and community responsibilities.

Folklore and performance scholarship helps explain why these dimensions matter. Bauman (1975) emphasises that performance gains meaning through the relationship between performers, audiences, and the social event. Bascom (1954) also argues that folklore can perform social and educational functions. Applied cautiously to festivals, these perspectives suggest that cultural meaning may be carried not only by the formal ritual but also by participation, shared knowledge, and the social relationships surrounding it.

Knowledge may be transmitted through observation, participation, family involvement, and repeated performance. Younger participants may learn by helping with preparations, observing experienced community members, or taking part in rituals. Kutin (2007) shows how storytelling is shaped by interaction among participants; a similar attention to participation can help researchers ask how festival knowledge is learned and shared, while recognising that the process varies across traditions.

However, not every festival performs the same function. The nature of the knowledge involved depends on the community, the local environment, the historical background, and the practices associated with the celebration. A contextual approach is therefore necessary to avoid treating community festivals as uniform cultural expressions.

4.2 Agricultural Knowledge and Environmental Relationships

The relationship between agricultural practices and festival traditions is particularly evident in the study of Burlang Yatra. Saxena (2020) examines the festival in Kandhamal district in connection with millet cultivation, Indigenous heirloom seed exchange, and community self-organisation. Her social-ecological approach highlights the importance of relationships between agricultural knowledge and collective community activity.

The exchange of seeds can involve accumulated experience, familiarity with crops, decisions about cultivation, and relationships among farmers. When such activities form part of a festival, they may create opportunities for agricultural knowledge to circulate among participants. The festival's significance consequently extends beyond celebration to include community interaction and the continuation of seed-related practices.

Nuakhai offers a related but distinct example. Kesavan (2024/2025) examines the relationship between Nuakhai, Bhai Jiuntia, rice culture, and kinship in western Odisha. Nuakhai is associated with the ritual consumption of newly harvested rice, while Bhai Jiuntia centres on ritual practices connected with the relationship between sisters and brothers. The study explores how rice cultivation and the ritual use of agricultural produce are connected with social relationships and cultural values.

These examples should not be treated as identical. Burlang Yatra is examined in relation to millet-related knowledge and seed exchange, whereas Kesavan's study focuses on rice culture, ritual practice, and kinship. Their comparative significance lies in demonstrating that agricultural festivals can connect material resources, cultural beliefs, and social relationships in different ways.

The findings suggest that cultural documentation should record the relationship between festivals and their agricultural or ecological settings wherever the evidence supports such an interpretation. It should also distinguish between documented knowledge and assumptions about a community's practices.

4.3 Ritual, Spirituality, and Community Identity

Festivals may express spiritual beliefs and collective identities through ritual objects, offerings, prayers, food practices, songs, and customary actions. These elements can connect participants with religious ideas, family histories, local traditions, and shared understandings of the world.

Pradhan and Goswami (2025) examine spirituality in selected forms of Odishan folklore. Their discussion covers several cultural expressions, including rituals, seasonal celebrations, performing arts, visual traditions, and narratives. This wider perspective supports the interpretation of folklore as a field in which artistic, spiritual, and social meanings may intersect.

The study of Nuakhai and Bhai Jiuntia by Kesavan (2024/2025) further illustrates the relationship between ritual practice and social structure. By examining rice culture and sibling relationships, the study shows that festival traditions may express kinship values while also revealing gendered expectations and tensions. Cultural practices should therefore not automatically be described as expressions of complete social harmony. They may reflect different roles, responsibilities, and experiences within a community.

For documentation, this means that ritual descriptions should be accompanied by explanations of their meanings where reliable sources provide them. Researchers should also avoid assuming that all participants interpret a practice in the same way. Differences in local understandings and changes over time are important aspects of living cultural heritage.

4.4 Intergenerational Transmission and Cultural Continuity

Intergenerational transmission is central to the continuity of traditional knowledge. Skills, beliefs, and practices may be learned through family participation, community gatherings, ritual preparation, oral explanation, and repeated performance. Festivals can provide occasions for younger members to observe and participate in inherited traditions.

Nevertheless, continuity does not necessarily mean that every aspect of a festival remains unchanged. Practices may be modified in response to changes in livelihoods, mobility, education, technology, environmental conditions, or community preferences. Some elements may continue, while others may be adapted or discontinued.

Living traditions should not be treated as fixed or unchanged. Blake (2019) discusses the importance of community participation in decisions concerning cultural heritage, while Del Barrio et al. (2012) show that cultural festivals can express identity and tradition in ways that depend on their social context. Cultural continuity should therefore not be assessed solely by whether a tradition appears unchanged. It is also important to consider whether community members continue to recognise the practice as meaningful and whether the knowledge associated with it remains accessible and relevant.

Documentation should accordingly record change as well as continuity. Where sources provide evidence of variation, different forms of a festival should not be collapsed into a single supposedly permanent version. Where information is unavailable, further investigation should be recommended rather than assumed.

4.5 Challenges in Documenting Community-Specific Festivals

4.5.1 Describing Activities Without Explaining Context

A major challenge in cultural documentation is the tendency to describe a festival mainly through its visible activities. A record may identify what happens and when it happens without explaining the agricultural, social, spiritual, or historical context of those practices.

The study of Burlang Yatra demonstrates the importance of considering seed exchange and agricultural knowledge alongside the festival itself (Saxena, 2020). Similarly, Kesavan's (2024/2025) study shows the value of understanding Nuakhai and Bhai Jiuntia in relation to rice culture and kinship. These examples indicate that a festival's significance may be obscured when documentation concentrates exclusively on outward ceremonial forms.

Contextual documentation should therefore explain relationships between ritual practices and the knowledge systems associated with them. Where the available evidence is limited, the record should identify that limitation rather than fill gaps with speculation.

4.5.2 Uneven Visibility and Representation

The public visibility of a festival does not necessarily reflect the range of knowledge it contains. Some celebrations receive attention because of their scale, religious importance, visual appeal, or tourism potential, while others may be represented mainly within local settings or specialised studies.

The literature reviewed here demonstrates the value of examining dimensions that may not be immediately apparent from general descriptions. Saxena (2020) places attention on seed exchange and community self-organisation, while Kesavan (2024/2025) explores the relationship between rice culture and kinship.

However, the limited selection of studies examined in this article does not establish the relative visibility or level of documentation of all festivals in Odisha. The relevant implication is that researchers should assess cultural traditions through their community contexts and available evidence rather than treating public prominence as the sole measure of significance.

4.5.3 Generalisation and Loss of Local Specificity

Broad categories such as agricultural festival, religious festival, or tribal festival can be useful for organising information, but they may also conceal differences in local history, ritual practice, and community meaning.

Even when two festivals share similar features, their meanings may not be interchangeable. Documentation should preserve the names used by communities, identify the relevant regional context, and distinguish source-based descriptions from interpretation. It should also avoid presenting one festival as representative of every community within a broad social category.

This consideration is particularly important when documenting Indigenous traditions. Cultural diversity within and between communities must be recognised, and claims about shared practices should be supported by appropriate evidence.

4.5.4 Ethical Concerns and Community Authority

Documentation also raises questions about consent, ownership, access, and representation. Photographs, recordings, ritual descriptions, and digital archives may contain information that communities do not wish to make publicly accessible. Blake (2019) highlights the importance and practical challenges of community involvement in heritage-related decisions. Documentation should therefore not be understood simply as collecting information for academic use.

Where original documentation is undertaken, researchers should consider consent, appropriate attribution, cultural protocols, storage, and access. Some information may require restricted access, and certain practices may not be suitable for recording. A responsible approach should recognise these possibilities rather than assuming that every cultural practice must be made publicly available.

4.6 Proposed Framework for Cultural Documentation

Drawing on the reviewed scholarship on festivals, oral tradition, performance, and community participation, this article proposes a six-part framework for documenting community-specific festivals. The framework is intended as a guide for future research and documentation projects; it has not been empirically tested in the present study.

a. Identification and cultural context: Record the festival's name, location, community association, customary period, and the sources through which it is documented. Where local names or versions differ, these differences should be preserved.

b. Rituals and associated activities: Describe the major activities connected with the festival, including ritual observances, food practices, songs, music, dance, oral narratives, or collective activities where these are documented. Explain their significance where reliable evidence is available.

c. Traditional and environmental knowledge: Examine connections with agricultural practices, seed exchange, crop cultivation, food preparation, seasonal changes, local biodiversity, or other forms of environmental knowledge where relevant to the particular festival.

d. Social relationships and participation: Consider family roles, community cooperation, age-related practices, gendered responsibilities, and other social relationships where the sources support such analysis. Avoid assuming that every participant shares the same experience or interpretation.

e. Intergenerational transmission and change: Document how knowledge is learned, which practices are maintained, and what changes are reported. If secondary sources do not provide enough information, identify the need for further research rather than drawing unsupported conclusions.

f. Ethical documentation and access: Where new records are created, consider consent, attribution, appropriate representation, storage, and access restrictions. Community participation should inform decisions about how traditions are recorded and shared.

These six dimensions encourage researchers to document festivals as living cultural practices rather than isolated events. Their application should be adapted to the particular community and tradition under study.

4.7 Recommendations for Researchers and Documentation Initiatives

First, researchers and cultural institutions should consider community significance alongside public visibility when selecting traditions for documentation. This does not mean assuming that every less-publicised festival is undocumented or at risk. Rather, priorities should be established through available evidence, research needs, and the interests of the communities concerned.

Second, festival documentation should combine descriptive information with contextual analysis. Dates, locations, and ritual sequences are useful starting points, but they should be supplemented by explanations of agricultural, social, spiritual, historical, or ecological relationships where evidence permits.

Third, researchers should distinguish between source-based information and interpretation. Academic studies, published descriptions, and community-created materials may provide different forms of evidence. Their origins and limitations should be made clear.

Fourth, community participation should be central to documentation projects. Where original records are produced, community members should have a meaningful role in decisions concerning consent, attribution, representation, storage, and access. Scholarship on community involvement in heritage safeguarding emphasises that participation requires more than consultation alone (Blake, 2019).

Fifth, digital platforms can support the organisation and accessibility of cultural records, but digitisation alone does not guarantee safeguarding. A digital archive may preserve a recording without adequately explaining its context or respecting restrictions on its use. Digital documentation should therefore include accurate descriptions, appropriate access arrangements, and provisions for long-term maintenance.

Finally, further research should examine a wider range of community-specific festivals across Odisha. Secondary-source analysis can provide a useful conceptual foundation, but it cannot answer every question about local meanings, contemporary participation, or changing practices. Future community-based research, undertaken with appropriate consent and cultural protocols, could evaluate the proposed framework and document regional variation.

4.8 Overall Discussion

The reviewed literature demonstrates that community-specific festivals can provide valuable settings for examining the relationship between cultural expression and traditional knowledge. Their significance may extend beyond visible ritual activities to include environmental relationships, social learning, spirituality, kinship, and collective memory. These dimensions are not necessarily present in the same form in every festival; their importance depends on the particular cultural and historical context.

Burlang Yatra illustrates the connection between a community festival, Indigenous seed exchange, millet-related knowledge, and social-ecological relationships (Saxena, 2020). Nuakhai and Bhai Jiuntia demonstrate how rice culture and ritual practice can be associated with kinship and gendered social relationships (Kesavan, 2024/2025). Pradhan and Goswami (2025), Bag (2020), and Majhi (2025) provide additional perspectives on the spiritual, narrative, and cultural dimensions of Odisha's traditions.

Together, these studies support a contextual approach to festival documentation. They do not establish a universal model of festival practice, nor do they provide a comprehensive account of all community-specific festivals in Odisha. Instead, they demonstrate why documentation should consider the relationships, knowledge, and meanings associated with each tradition.

The proposed framework responds to this need by bringing together cultural identification, ritual description, traditional knowledge, social participation, intergenerational transmission, and ethical responsibility. Its value lies in providing a structured basis for future documentation, while leaving room for adaptation to individual communities and their priorities.

The discussion also distinguishes between documenting a tradition and sustaining it. A record can preserve information about a festival, but it cannot by

itself ensure that the associated knowledge, skills, relationships, or social conditions will continue. Documentation is most useful when it supports informed understanding and community-defined priorities rather than treating cultural preservation as the unchanging reproduction of the past.

The principal limitation of the present study is its reliance on selected secondary sources. Further research across a wider range of festivals, including appropriate community participation and field documentation, will be needed to assess local variation and evaluate the practical usefulness of the proposed framework.

5. Conclusion

Community-specific festivals provide an important perspective for understanding the relationship between cultural expression and traditional knowledge in Odisha. Their significance may be reflected in agricultural practices, environmental understanding, spirituality, social relationships, oral traditions, and the transmission of knowledge across generations. The selected studies of Burlang Yatra, Nuakhai, and Bhai Jiuntia demonstrate that festivals can connect visible celebrations with wider cultural, social, and ecological processes.

The article argues that documenting festivals requires more than recording dates, locations, and ritual activities. Responsible documentation should consider local context, the knowledge associated with particular practices, forms of participation, cultural change, and the ethical responsibilities involved in representing communities. Scholarship on cultural festivals and community participation provides a useful foundation for this approach (Del Barrio et al., 2012; Blake, 2019).

A six-part documentation framework has been proposed, covering identification and context, rituals and activities, traditional knowledge, social relationships, intergenerational transmission, and ethical recording and access. This framework is a conceptual recommendation derived from secondary sources and has not been empirically tested in the present study.

The value of documenting community festivals lies not simply in preserving a record of a celebration but in improving understanding of the relationships and knowledge that sustain it. A contextual and community-centred approach can contribute to responsible cultural research and provide a foundation for future safeguarding initiatives. Further research across a wider range of festivals in Odisha will be necessary to assess local variation, evaluate the proposed framework, and develop documentation practices that respect the communities whose traditions they seek to understand.

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