

Cultural Diversity as a Tool for National Integration

India's cultural diversity remains a powerful force for national integration. Rural traditions, folk performances, tribal practices, fairs, festivals, and traditional arts create spaces for social interaction, cultural exchange, and collective participation. While modernisation and globalisation present new challenges, government interventions and community initiatives are helping preserve these invaluable cultural assets. The article discusses how living cultural traditions continue to strengthen social cohesion, promote inclusiveness, and reinforce India's unity in diversity.

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Culture and tradition are two fundamental pillars of Indian society. It is not merely a form of celebration but a tool for socialisation and solidarity. Festivals bring together people from different castes, classes and region, thereby promoting the spirit of "Unity in Diversity".

Different regions and religions in India have different forms of celebration, but the motive remains the same. Melas like Kumbh, Pushkar, Sonapur and Bhagoria are celebrated in different regions and bring people together. Similarly, folklore such as Pandavani, Villu Paatu, Dadhi Jatha, and Chhau dance share religious, historical, and moral values. These practices serve as a bridge between

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regions, religions, and communities. Art forms such as Ikat weaving, Dhokra metal art, Warli paintings, and Baul music showcase India's vast cultural wealth and have played a significant role in preserving the nation's identity.

With the effect of globalisation, people have come closer to one another. Migration, tourism, and digital media have created opportunities for cultural exchange. However, rapid urbanisation and economic pressures have threatened the existence of traditional culture and identity. In response to this threat, several efforts have been made through government initiatives and community-led interventions to protect and promote our cultural heritage. This article examines how rural cultural traditions act as a tool for strengthening social cohesion, cultural integration, and national identity.

Folk Traditions, Fairs and Festivals as Engines of Social Cohesion

Festivals in India create a space of socialisation and integration where people from different ethnicities, irrespective of their caste and class participate together. It's not merely a celebration, it promotes solidarity and cultural integration. Similarly, fairs bring together pilgrims, traders, artisans, and tourists from different regions. For example, Pushkar in Rajasthan and the Sonepur mela of Bihar attract large number of participants every year. These gatherings serve as a space for culture exchange, commerce, spirituality and celebration.

Table 1: - Participation and Footfall in Major Indian Fairs

Sl No	Fair/ Mela	People Participated	Duration	Avg. Footfall per Day
1	Pushkar	35 lakh	7 Days	5 lakh
2	Kumbh	6600 lakh	45 Days	146.67 lakh
3	Sonepur	25–30 lakh	15 Days	1.67–2 lakh

Source: - PIB, Times of India, Rail.com

Maha Kumbh at Prayagraj in 2025 was attended by nearly 66 crore pilgrims over 45 days, averaging 147 lakh pilgrims per day. People from different castes, classes, regions, and religions witnessed the event. It reflects India's shared spiritual tradition, collective participation and inclusiveness. Various anthropological studies have demonstrated that festivals strengthen social bonding, encourage cultural exchange, and help preserve traditions across generations.

Tribal and Indigenous Cultural Practices: The Collective Heritage

India is home to 705 Scheduled Tribes, accounting for nearly 8.6 per cent of the total population. These tribes preserve the country's most ancient and ecologically grounded cultural traditions. Gond art of Madhya Pradesh, Warli paintings of Maharashtra, Bhil dances of Gujarat and Santali music of Jharkhand are a few examples of vibrant tribal cultural expressions. These traditions embody rich worldviews that reflect the community's understanding of time, universe and existence. For example, Sarhul is celebrated mainly by the Oraon, Munda, and Ho communities of Jharkhand during the onset of spring often considered the tribal's New Year. They worship the Sal (Sakhuwa) tree, believed to be the abode of Sarna Maa, symbolising reverence for forests and the environment. It reflects the tribal belief that nature is sacred and integrated with human life. Such practices serve as living archives of indigenous ecological knowledge, preserved through oral tradition and structurally protected by tribal ritual and self-governance.

Rural Cultural Tradition as a Bridge between Region, Religion and Communities

Folklore and dance have always served as a medium of artistic expression across India. Chhau, a semi-classical dance of eastern India, is a perfect example of the cultural bridge, also recognised as the "Intangible Cultural Heritage" by UNESCO. When Hinduism began its expansion into eastern India, the stories of the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Puranas were presented through Chhau dance. Over time, the epic provided a shared cultural identity for individuals who lived in Odisha, Jharkhand and West Bengal. Chhau not only helped in preserving local traditions; it acted as a living bridge uniting rural society together through a shared religious belief and collective celebrations.

Oral Traditions, Local Languages, and Storytelling in Preserving National Identity

As globalisation continues to grow, there is an influence of westernisation on our culture. Oral tradition has been a tool for keeping alive our cultural knowledge. Stories, songs, beliefs and other forms of cultural knowledge have been passed orally from one generation to another.

In Odisha, Bhagabata Tungi has long served as a place where villagers gather to read and discuss religious



stories. Pandavani of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha are another example of oral tradition for keeping alive the stories of the Mahabharata. While Villu Paatu of Tamil Nadu and Kerala use folklore to convey social and cultural values. Similarly, in Punjab, Dadhi Jatha preserves Sikh history, heroic tales and religious traditions through storytelling and folk performances. These traditions not only preserved local culture but also strengthened the nation's cultural identity.

Contribution of Rural Arts, Crafts, Music and Handloom Traditions towards Cultural Integration

Arts and crafts have long served a medium for cultural exchange in India. It has been promoted through handmade textiles, pottery, paintings and various other art forms. For example, the Madhubani painting of Bihar depicts the Hindu mythology, nature, village life, and social traditions. While Phulkari of Punjab beautifully portrays floral and garden motifs intricately woven into fabric. Warli painting from Maharashtra depict community-based themes of agriculture and reverence for nature. Similarly, Dhokra art of Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, famous for the "lost-wax" casting technique, shares the tribal life, animals and nature.

Music has also served as an important medium for sharing culture and tradition. Baul music of Bengal is a remarkable example of cultural synthesis, combining the joyful devotion of Hindu Vaishnavism, the inner

mysticism of Sufi Islam, and the tantric ideas of Buddhist Sahajiya. These art forms have helped India in cultural integration.

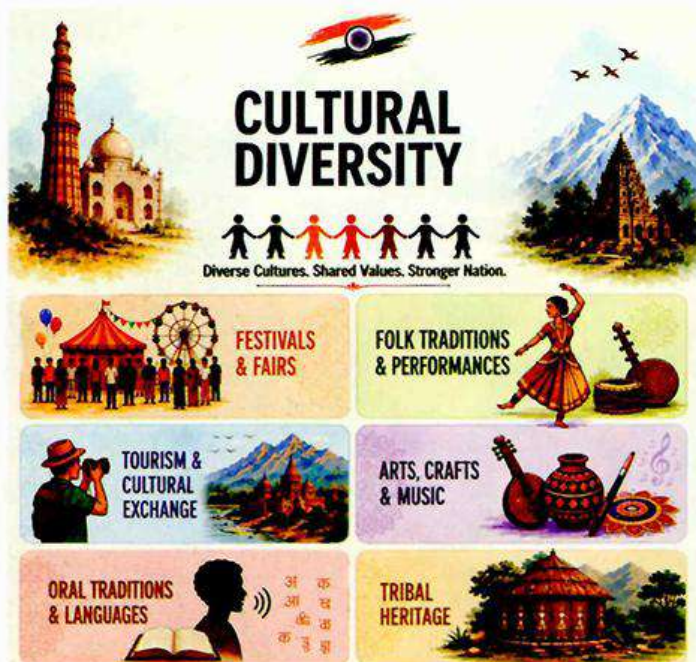
Impact of Migration, Tourism, Digital Media and Cultural Exchange in Connecting Rural Communities

Migration, tourism, digital media and cultural exchanges have connected rural India to the rest of the world. Migration has enabled people to adopt innovative ideas, lifestyles, languages and social practices. Tourism has created opportunities for rural communities to present their culture and tradition to visitors.

For instance, villagers offering Phiran in Jammu Kashmir and Jadoh in Arunachal to tourists an example of how tourism has helped in the cultural exchange. Homestays in Jashpur District of Chhattisgarh showcase daily life and lifestyle of local communities. Similarly, Belgadia Palace of Mayurbhanj in Odisha provides the cultural experience of tribal tradition, local cuisine, and rich history. These projects have helped create a link between rural communities and a broader national and international audience.

Additionally, digital media has expanded the opportunities of cultural exchange beyond geographical boundaries. For example, in the recent Raolene festival, a 5000-year-old tradition of Kinnaur in Himachal Pradesh was rediscovered through digital platform. This not only attracted tourists but also helped connect communities across region.





Government Initiatives and Community-Led Efforts

The Government of India has implemented several programmes and policies to preserve and promote rural cultures and traditions. The fifth and sixth Schedules of the Constitution mandate the protection and preservation of the social and cultural identity of tribal communities while enabling them to have control over their resources and governance. The Forest Rights Act (2006) and the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act (1996) allow communities to live in their natural habitat and protect their traditions by empowering their Gram Sabha. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs implements various programmes for the culture preservation of 705 Scheduled Tribes and 75 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs).

The Scheme for Protection and Promotion of Endangered Languages (SPPEL) aims to document and preserve endangered languages in India. The recently launched Pradhan Mantri Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan (PM-JANMAN) in 2023 also focuses on improving basic services to PVTG. Tribal Research Institutes in India document and promote tribal languages, folklore and crafts. The Pradhan Mantri Janjatiya Vikas Mission (PMJVM) and Van Dhan Vikas Kendra promote their handicraft, skills and livelihood. The National Mission for Cultural Mapping (NMCM), launched in 2017 under the Ministry of Culture Affairs, maps the cultural assets of the village for institutional support. The Zonal Cultural Centers organise festivals, exchange programmes and training that bring together artists from different states. Since 1952,

the Sangeet Natak Akademi's fellowship programme has supported over 30,000 artists across the nation.

Festivals like Hornbill, supported by the government in Nagaland, provide a platform for showcasing tribal music, dance, painting and crafts. The community-led initiatives in Raghurajpur, Odisha, also known as India's first heritage crafts village, are the archive of the Pattachitra artists. The Eklavya Foundation in Madhya Pradesh has developed culturally contextualised educational materials in tribal languages, bridging culture and education, which are few examples of community-led efforts for the preservation of cultural heritage.

Contemporary Challenges and Pathways for Inclusive Cultural Values

Despite the rich tapestry, India's rural cultural ecosystem faces severe contemporary challenges. As per the Language Census of India 2011, we have lost 250 languages. The homogenising force of mass media, particularly algorithm-driven social media, creates aspirational monocultures that marginalise regional aesthetics. The 75th National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) report highlights that nearly 40 per cent of weaver are unable to meet their basic needs. Rapid urbanisation has disrupted the intergenerational knowledge. Youths in villages are seeking upward mobility for formal employment, abandoning their traditional livelihoods. While climate change has changed rainfall patterns and increased sea level, threatening many cultural ecological foundations.

To preserve cultural values, a multi-pronged approach is necessary: -

1. Integration of cultural education with the school curriculum through local languages.
2. Economic models must recognise cultural labour, securing fair market access, social safety, and intellectual property.
3. Laws must recognise living cultural practices beyond museums and create platforms for cultural exchange.
4. Climate change must be addressed to protect and preserve our cultural heritage.

The challenge for India is not to choose between tradition and modernity or between national unity and local identity. It is to create the economic, legal, and pedagogical framework under which culture and tradition can flourish. ■