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Original Research Article

Indian festivals as instruments of cultural continuity and social cohesion

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ABSTRACT

Indian festivals constitute one of the most enduring expressions of the country's civilizational heritage. They embody the historical continuity of traditions, reinforce collective memory, and promote social integration among culturally diverse communities. India, characterized by remarkable linguistic, religious, ethnic, and regional diversity, has maintained its cultural unity largely through shared rituals, celebrations, and symbolic practices that transcend social divisions. Festivals are not merely occasions for religious observance or entertainment; they function as dynamic institutions that transmit values, preserve indigenous knowledge, strengthen interpersonal relationships, and cultivate a sense of national belonging. In contemporary society, festivals continue to adapt to changing socio-economic conditions while retaining their essential cultural significance. The emergence of globalization, rapid urbanization, commercialization, environmental concerns, and digital communication has transformed the organization and experience of festivals, creating both opportunities and challenges for cultural preservation. Simultaneously, festivals have become important instruments of cultural diplomacy, tourism development, economic activity, and interfaith dialogue. This paper examines the multidimensional role of Indian festivals as mechanisms of cultural continuity and social cohesion. Drawing upon sociological, anthropological, and cultural theories, the study explores how festivals contribute to identity formation, intergenerational knowledge transfer, community participation, national integration, and sustainable development. The paper further discusses contemporary challenges confronting traditional festivals and proposes strategies for preserving their cultural authenticity while accommodating modern societal transformations. The analysis demonstrates that Indian festivals continue to serve as living institutions that integrate tradition with modernity and local identities with national consciousness.

1. Introduction

India is widely recognized as one of the world's oldest continuous civilizations, distinguished by extraordinary cultural diversity and remarkable social resilience. Despite centuries of political transitions, foreign influences, religious transformations, and economic changes, Indian society has preserved a strong sense of cultural continuity. Among the numerous institutions that have facilitated this continuity, festivals occupy a unique and indispensable position. They represent the living expressions of civilization, connecting historical traditions with contemporary social life while simultaneously strengthening interpersonal relationships and collective identities.

Festivals in India extend beyond religious ceremonies. They encompass agricultural celebrations, seasonal observances, historical commemorations, regional customs, tribal traditions, and national festivals. Whether celebrating harvests, changing seasons, mythological events, spiritual ideals, or national achievements, festivals create opportunities for collective participation that transcend social boundaries. They encourage interaction among individuals belonging to different castes, religions, linguistic communities, economic classes, and regions, thereby strengthening social cohesion and cultural integration [1].

The concept of social cohesion refers to the degree of connectedness and solidarity among members of a society. Socially cohesive communities demonstrate high levels of trust, mutual cooperation, shared identity, and collective responsibility. Festivals contribute significantly to these characteristics by bringing people together through common rituals, cultural performances, community meals, charitable activities, and public celebrations. Such interactions generate social capital that reinforces both local communities and national unity [2].

Simultaneously, festivals function as effective mechanisms of cultural continuity. Oral traditions, folk music, dance forms, handicrafts, indigenous cuisines, ritual practices, traditional attire, local languages, and ethical values are transmitted across generations through repeated festival celebrations. Children learn cultural norms by actively participating in these occasions alongside elders, ensuring that intangible cultural heritage remains vibrant rather than merely preserved in historical records [3].

The growing influence of globalization has introduced significant changes in the organization and perception of festivals. Commercialization, digital media, urban lifestyles, migration, tourism, and technological innovations have



reshaped traditional celebrations. While these developments have expanded cultural visibility and economic opportunities, they have also generated concerns regarding environmental sustainability, cultural commodification, declining traditional practices, and increasing consumerism [4]. Consequently, understanding festivals as dynamic social institutions rather than static cultural relics has become increasingly important.

The present study examines the multifaceted role of Indian festivals as instruments of cultural continuity and social cohesion. It integrates historical, sociological, anthropological, and cultural perspectives to explain how festivals preserve civilizational heritage while responding to contemporary social transformations.

2. Historical evolution of Indian festivals

The history of Indian festivals is closely intertwined with the evolution of Indian civilization itself. Archaeological findings from the Indus Valley Civilization suggest organized community gatherings, ritual practices, and seasonal observances associated with agricultural cycles and nature worship. Although the precise nature of these celebrations remains uncertain, evidence indicates that collective ceremonies formed an integral part of early urban societies [5].

During the Vedic period, festivals became increasingly associated with seasonal transitions, agricultural prosperity, and sacrificial rituals. Celebrations marked important astronomical events such as solstices, equinoxes, harvest seasons, and lunar cycles. Over time, these observances became integrated with philosophical concepts articulated in the Vedas, Upanishads, and later Hindu traditions [6].

The emergence of Buddhism and Jainism further diversified India's festival landscape. Commemorations such as Buddha Purnima and Mahavir Jayanti introduced ethical themes emphasizing compassion, non-violence, and spiritual discipline. Rather than replacing earlier traditions, these festivals enriched India's pluralistic cultural environment.

The medieval period witnessed extensive cultural interactions among Hindu, Islamic, Sikh, and regional traditions. Festivals such as Eid, Muharram, Guru Nanak Jayanti, and Baisakhi became integral components of India's cultural mosaic. Many regions developed syncretic practices where communities participated in each other's celebrations, reinforcing interfaith harmony and shared cultural experiences [7].

Colonial rule introduced additional transformations. National festivals gradually acquired political significance during the freedom movement. Public celebrations of Ganesh Chaturthi, initiated on a larger social scale by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, became important platforms for nationalist mobilization. Similarly, regional festivals increasingly contributed to the formation of collective political consciousness and resistance against colonial authority [8].

Following independence, national festivals such as Independence Day, Republic Day, and Gandhi Jayanti strengthened civic nationalism while complementing India's traditional religious and cultural festivals. Today, India's festival calendar reflects thousands of local, regional, religious, and national celebrations representing one of the world's richest systems of living cultural heritage.



Figure 1: Historical evolution of Indian festivals.

3. Theoretical framework

Understanding the societal significance of festivals requires an interdisciplinary theoretical approach incorporating sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and communication theory.

French sociologist Émile Durkheim regarded religious ceremonies and collective rituals as essential mechanisms through which societies reinforce collective consciousness. According to Durkheim, festivals generate emotional solidarity that strengthens social integration and moral unity [9]. This perspective remains highly relevant in explaining why Indian festivals continue to unite diverse populations.

Victor Turner's theory of *communitas* further emphasizes the temporary dissolution of social hierarchies during ritual participation. Festivals create liminal spaces where individuals experience equality, cooperation, and collective belonging beyond ordinary social distinctions [10].

Clifford Geertz interpreted culture as a system of symbolic meanings communicated through rituals and ceremonies. Festivals therefore function as symbolic texts through which societies express shared values, historical memories, and collective identities [11].

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital highlights the role of festivals in transmitting knowledge, customs, artistic traditions, linguistic expressions, and social norms across generations. Participation in festivals enables individuals to acquire cultural competencies essential for maintaining community identity [12].

Modern theories of social capital proposed by Robert Putnam also contribute significantly to understanding festivals. Community participation during celebrations enhances interpersonal trust, voluntary cooperation, civic engagement, and institutional confidence, thereby strengthening democratic societies [13].

Together, these theoretical perspectives demonstrate that festivals are not isolated cultural events but complex social institutions that integrate symbolic communication, social organization, cultural transmission, and community development.

4. Festivals as mechanisms of cultural continuity

Cultural continuity refers to the sustained transmission of beliefs, customs, knowledge systems, artistic traditions, ethical values, and collective memories across successive generations. Indian festivals constitute one of the most effective mechanisms for preserving this continuity because they combine ritual performance with everyday social participation.

Unlike formal educational institutions, festivals provide experiential learning environments where knowledge is transmitted through observation, participation, storytelling, music, dance, food preparation, craftsmanship, and family interaction. Children learn religious narratives, regional folklore, moral values, traditional etiquette, and ecological awareness by actively engaging in festival celebrations alongside parents and grandparents.

Many indigenous art forms survive primarily because they remain embedded within festival traditions. Classical dance performances, folk theatre, devotional music, rangoli art, kolam designs, idol making, handloom textiles, bamboo crafts, pottery, and regional culinary traditions continue to flourish through recurring cultural celebrations. These practices

preserve both tangible and intangible heritage while generating livelihoods for artisan communities [14].

Festivals also reinforce linguistic continuity. Regional songs, folk narratives, ritual chants, oral epics, and local dialects are performed extensively during festive occasions, ensuring the survival of linguistic diversity despite increasing globalization and linguistic homogenization.

Furthermore, festivals preserve ecological knowledge accumulated over centuries. Agricultural festivals such as Pongal, Makar Sankranti, Baisakhi, Nuakhai, Onam, and Bihu reflect intimate relationships between communities and seasonal environmental cycles. Traditional celebrations frequently incorporate indigenous knowledge concerning rainfall, crop cycles, biodiversity, medicinal plants, livestock management, and sustainable resource utilization.

Consequently, Indian festivals function not merely as commemorative occasions but as dynamic educational systems through which civilizations reproduce themselves across generations.

5. Festivals as instruments of social cohesion

Social cohesion refers to the strength of relationships, mutual trust, shared identity, and collective responsibility that bind members of a society together. In a country as culturally, linguistically, religiously, and ethnically diverse as India, festivals serve as powerful institutions that foster social solidarity and peaceful coexistence. They provide common social spaces where people interact beyond the boundaries of caste, religion, class, gender, occupation, and region, thereby strengthening interpersonal relationships and community resilience [15].

Unlike formal institutions that regulate social behavior through laws or administrative structures, festivals generate voluntary participation based on shared emotions, traditions, and cultural values. During festive occasions, individuals visit one another's homes, exchange greetings and gifts, participate in community feasts, organize cultural performances, and collectively contribute to charitable activities. Such interactions enhance mutual understanding and reduce social distance among different social groups.

Many Indian festivals are celebrated across religious communities despite their specific religious origins. Diwali, Holi, Eid-ul-Fitr, Christmas, Guru Nanak Jayanti, Onam, Pongal, Baisakhi, and Navroz have increasingly become occasions of shared celebration in schools, workplaces, universities, government institutions, and neighborhoods. Participation in each other's festivals promotes intercultural dialogue and nurtures respect for cultural diversity [16].

Festivals also play a significant role in strengthening rural communities. Village fairs (*melas*), harvest festivals, temple festivals, and local cultural gatherings provide opportunities for collective decision-making, economic exchange, conflict resolution, and social networking. Such events reinforce traditional institutions while simultaneously adapting to changing socio-economic realities.

In urban India, where migration often weakens traditional social networks, residential welfare associations, educational institutions, corporate organizations, and cultural clubs increasingly organize community celebrations that recreate collective identities among diverse populations. These celebrations help migrants maintain emotional connections

with their cultural heritage while integrating into new urban environments.

From a sociological perspective, festivals generate bonding social capital, which strengthens relationships within

communities, and bridging social capital, which connects different communities through shared participation and cooperation. These dual functions make festivals indispensable for sustaining India's pluralistic social fabric [17].



Figure 2: Festivals as catalysts of social cohesion.

6. Festivals and intergenerational transmission of cultural heritage

One of the most remarkable characteristics of Indian festivals is their ability to facilitate intergenerational learning. Cultural continuity depends not only on preserving historical artifacts but also on ensuring that traditions remain actively practiced by successive generations. Festivals provide ideal settings for this transmission because they combine education with participation and emotional engagement.

Within families, elders narrate mythological stories, explain ritual significance, teach traditional songs, prepare festive foods, and demonstrate customary practices to younger members. These interactions cultivate historical awareness, moral values, and cultural identity from an early age. Unlike classroom education, festival-based learning is experiential, participatory, and emotionally meaningful, making cultural knowledge more enduring [18].

Traditional crafts associated with festivals—including clay idol making, handloom weaving, floral decoration, rangoli creation, bamboo artistry, toy making, brass work, and folk painting—are often learned through apprenticeship within artisan families. Seasonal demand generated by festivals

ensures the continuity of these indigenous occupations while preserving specialized skills developed over centuries.

Festivals also encourage linguistic preservation. Folk songs, devotional hymns, regional dramas, storytelling traditions, proverbs, and oral histories are performed in local languages during festive occasions, strengthening linguistic diversity in an era of rapid globalization.

Educational institutions have increasingly recognized the pedagogical value of festivals. Schools organize cultural exhibitions, traditional dress competitions, folk dance performances, heritage walks, food festivals, and language activities that introduce students to India's multicultural traditions while promoting national integration.

Digital technologies have further expanded opportunities for cultural transmission. Online archives, virtual celebrations, live-streamed rituals, social media campaigns, and digital storytelling platforms enable younger generations to engage with traditional practices even when geographically separated from their ancestral communities. However, maintaining authenticity amidst digital transformation remains an important challenge.

Table 1: Major contributions of Indian festivals to cultural continuity.

Dimension	Contribution
Cultural Heritage	Preservation of rituals, customs, folklore, traditions
Family Values	Strengthening intergenerational relationships
Language	Promotion of regional languages and oral traditions
Arts and Crafts	Preservation of folk arts and indigenous craftsmanship
Traditional Knowledge	Transmission of ecological and agricultural wisdom
Social Values	Cooperation, charity, empathy, respect, hospitality
Local Economy	Support for artisans, vendors, performers, and tourism

7. Festivals, economy, and community development

Although festivals are primarily cultural institutions, they also make substantial contributions to economic development. India's festive economy encompasses handicrafts, textiles, floriculture, agriculture, transportation, tourism, hospitality, food industries, entertainment, retail trade, and digital commerce. Seasonal demand generated during festivals creates millions of temporary and permanent employment opportunities across both rural and urban sectors [19].

Artisans producing clay idols, handcrafted decorations, traditional garments, jewelry, musical instruments, folk paintings, earthen lamps, bamboo products, and ceremonial items depend significantly on festival markets. Many indigenous crafts that might otherwise decline remain economically viable because of recurring festive demand.

Religious tourism represents another important dimension of festival economics. Major celebrations such as Kumbh Mela, Jagannath Rath Yatra, Durga Puja, Thrissur Pooram, Pushkar Fair, and Hornbill Festival attract millions of domestic and international visitors annually. These events generate employment in transportation, accommodation, food services, local handicrafts, cultural performances, and tourism infrastructure [20].

Community festivals also strengthen local governance through voluntary participation. Residents collectively organize sanitation drives, security arrangements, environmental awareness campaigns, blood donation camps, medical services, and educational initiatives during festival periods. Such collaborative efforts enhance civic responsibility while strengthening neighborhood solidarity.

The growing digital economy has further transformed festival-related commerce. Online shopping platforms, digital payment systems, virtual marketplaces, and social media marketing have expanded market access for small producers and rural artisans. Nevertheless, equitable digital inclusion remains essential to ensure that traditional communities fully benefit from these technological opportunities.

8. Festivals and national integration

India's constitutional vision emphasizes unity in diversity, recognizing pluralism as the foundation of national identity. Festivals contribute significantly to this vision by simultaneously preserving regional distinctiveness and promoting national solidarity.

National festivals such as Independence Day, Republic Day, and Gandhi Jayanti reinforce constitutional values including democracy, secularism, equality, justice, and freedom. These civic celebrations complement religious and regional festivals by fostering a shared national consciousness rooted in common historical experiences.

Equally important are regional festivals that have acquired national recognition. Celebrations such as Onam, Pongal, Bihu, Lohri, Ganesh Chaturthi, Durga Puja, Navratri, and Hornbill

Festival are now observed across different states through educational institutions, media, cultural organizations, and diaspora communities. This nationwide participation promotes mutual appreciation of India's diverse cultural traditions [21].

Mass media has amplified the integrative role of festivals. Television broadcasts, films, documentaries, newspapers, radio programs, and digital platforms showcase regional customs to national audiences, enhancing cultural awareness and reducing stereotypes. Indian diaspora communities further extend these celebrations internationally, strengthening cultural diplomacy and projecting India's pluralistic identity worldwide.

Festivals therefore function simultaneously at local, regional, national, and global levels, making them important instruments of cultural integration in an increasingly interconnected world.

9. Indian festivals, environmental sustainability, and indigenous ecological knowledge

Indian festivals have historically maintained a close relationship with nature. Most traditional celebrations are linked to seasonal cycles, agricultural activities, rivers, forests, mountains, animals, and celestial phenomena. This ecological foundation reflects the Indian philosophical understanding that human beings are integral components of nature rather than separate from it. Consequently, many festivals embody principles of environmental stewardship and sustainable living that remain relevant in the twenty-first century [22].

Agricultural festivals such as Pongal, Makar Sankranti, Baisakhi, Onam, Nuakhai, Bihu, and Lohri celebrate harvest seasons while expressing gratitude toward the sun, rain, soil, rivers, cattle, and other natural resources. These celebrations reinforce ecological awareness by recognizing the dependence of human prosperity on environmental balance.

Similarly, festivals dedicated to rivers, trees, animals, and biodiversity reflect indigenous conservation ethics. Rituals associated with sacred groves, river worship, and tree planting historically contributed to the protection of local ecosystems. Many communities traditionally prohibited the cutting of certain trees or the pollution of water bodies during religious observances, thereby promoting sustainable environmental practices through cultural norms rather than legal regulations [23].

However, rapid urbanization and commercialization have introduced environmental challenges. The use of non-biodegradable decorations, chemical-based colors, plastic materials, synthetic idols, excessive lighting, noise pollution, and waste generation has altered the ecological character of several festivals. Increased consumption has also raised concerns regarding carbon emissions and resource utilization.

In response, governments, civil society organizations, educational institutions, and religious communities have promoted environmentally responsible celebrations. Eco-friendly idols made from natural clay, biodegradable

decorations, organic colors, energy-efficient lighting, plastic-free celebrations, rainwater conservation campaigns, and community clean-up initiatives are increasingly becoming integral components of festival management. These

innovations demonstrate that cultural continuity and environmental sustainability can coexist through adaptive traditions [24].



Figure 3: Festivals and sustainable development.

10. Globalization, digital media, and the transformation of festivals

Globalization has significantly transformed the nature of Indian festivals. Improvements in communication technologies, international migration, tourism, digital media, and economic liberalization have expanded the visibility of Indian cultural traditions beyond national boundaries. Today, festivals such as Diwali, Holi, International Day of Yoga, Durga Puja, and Navratri are celebrated in numerous countries, contributing to India's cultural diplomacy and global soft power [25].

The Indian diaspora has played an important role in this global expansion. Migrant communities organize festivals through cultural associations, temples, gurudwaras, mosques, educational institutions, and community organizations. These celebrations preserve cultural identity among overseas Indians while simultaneously introducing Indian traditions to multicultural societies.

Digital technologies have further transformed festival participation. Social media platforms facilitate virtual greetings, live-streaming of rituals, online cultural performances, and digital storytelling. Families separated by geographical distance can participate collectively through video conferencing, thereby maintaining emotional connections despite physical separation.

E-commerce has reshaped festive consumption by enabling online purchases of traditional clothing, decorations, gifts, sweets, handicrafts, and ritual materials. Small businesses increasingly use digital platforms to reach national and international markets.

Despite these advantages, globalization has also generated concerns regarding excessive commercialization, cultural commodification, consumerism, and the simplification of complex traditions into market-oriented spectacles. Traditional community-centered celebrations may gradually shift toward individualized consumption unless cultural education accompanies technological modernization [26].

Therefore, the future of Indian festivals depends upon achieving an appropriate balance between innovation and authenticity, ensuring that technological progress complements rather than replaces traditional cultural values.

11. Contemporary challenges to cultural continuity

Although Indian festivals continue to flourish, several contemporary developments present significant challenges to their traditional functions.

One major concern is commercialization. Increasing corporate sponsorship, aggressive marketing, luxury consumption, and competitive display have shifted attention from cultural values toward material expenditure in some

celebrations. Excessive commercialization may weaken the educational and ethical dimensions of festivals.

A second challenge involves urbanization and changing lifestyles. Nuclear families, migration, demanding work schedules, and reduced community interaction have limited opportunities for collective participation. Younger generations may become less familiar with traditional rituals and local customs if intergenerational engagement declines.

Environmental degradation represents another important concern. Plastic waste, chemical pollutants, excessive electricity consumption, and noise pollution require continuous public awareness and responsible festival management.

The rapid spread of misinformation through digital media occasionally contributes to social polarization and communal misunderstanding. Since festivals are intended to strengthen social harmony, responsible media practices and intercultural dialogue are essential for preventing conflict.

Furthermore, the decline of traditional artisans poses a serious threat to intangible cultural heritage. Mechanized production and imported decorative materials often replace locally handcrafted products, reducing economic opportunities for indigenous craft communities [27].

12. Policy recommendations

To strengthen the role of Indian festivals as instruments of cultural continuity and social cohesion, several policy initiatives deserve consideration.

First, educational curricula should incorporate experiential learning through festival-based cultural education, encouraging students to understand the historical, philosophical, ecological, and social significance of major Indian festivals.

Second, greater institutional support should be provided to traditional artisans, folk performers, musicians, and craft communities through financial assistance, skill development, digital marketing, and heritage preservation programs.

Third, environmentally sustainable festival practices should be promoted through awareness campaigns, regulatory measures, community participation, and incentives for eco-friendly products.

Fourth, digital documentation of oral traditions, folk music, rituals, regional languages, and indigenous knowledge systems should be expanded to preserve endangered cultural heritage for future generations.

Fifth, intercultural festivals organized by educational institutions, universities, municipalities, and cultural organizations should encourage participation from multiple religious and linguistic communities, thereby strengthening constitutional values of pluralism and national integration.

Finally, cultural tourism policies should prioritize community participation and heritage conservation rather than purely commercial objectives, ensuring that economic development remains compatible with cultural authenticity [28].



Figure 4: Indian festivals as instruments of cultural continuity and social cohesion.

13. Conclusion

Indian festivals represent one of the most resilient institutions of the country's civilizational heritage. Their significance extends far beyond religious observance, encompassing cultural preservation, social integration, economic development, environmental awareness, and national unity. Through recurring cycles of collective celebration, festivals transmit ethical values, historical memories, artistic traditions, indigenous knowledge, and social norms from one generation to another, thereby ensuring cultural continuity in a rapidly changing world.

The analysis presented in this paper demonstrates that festivals strengthen social cohesion by encouraging interpersonal interaction, intercultural dialogue, community participation, and mutual respect among India's diverse populations. They generate both bonding and bridging social capital, enabling local identities to coexist harmoniously within a broader national framework. Their contribution to rural development, artisan livelihoods, tourism, education, and cultural diplomacy further illustrates their multidimensional importance.

At the same time, festivals face significant contemporary challenges arising from commercialization, environmental degradation, urbanization, changing lifestyles, and digital transformation. Rather than viewing these developments solely as threats, policymakers and cultural institutions should adopt adaptive strategies that preserve traditional values while embracing sustainable innovation.

Ultimately, the enduring vitality of Indian festivals lies in their remarkable capacity to reconcile continuity with change. They connect the past with the present, local traditions with national identity, and cultural diversity with social unity. As living embodiments of India's pluralistic civilization, festivals will continue to serve as indispensable instruments of cultural continuity and social cohesion, contributing not only to national integration but also to global appreciation of India's rich cultural heritage.

Author contributions

The author solely conceived the study, reviewed the literature, analyzed the available evidence, interpreted the findings, and prepared the manuscript.

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