Exploring Cultural Resilience: Traditions, Legacy, And Values In Tribal Population Of Kerala

*V.G. Harishkumar, R. Gurumoorthy

Abstract

This article explores the complex interweaving of cultural resilience within indigenous societies, revealing the significant influence of traditions, heritage, and fundamental principles. The study sheds light on the importance of traditional rites, such as coming out ceremonies, tribal dancing, and artistic activities, in preserving a link with history, based on extensive conversations with tribal adolescents. Participants articulate a strong obligation to maintain familial traditions, especially in the face of personal hardships, underscoring the profound link between cultural rituals and one's sense of self. The examination of heritage uncovers a shared experience of deep emotional distress caused by past subjugation, colonisation, and forced relocation, underscoring the significance of cultural inheritance and adaptability in forming the indigenous story. Physical and linguistic characteristics are important indicators of tribal identity, while a set of fundamental principles such as respect, compassion, and spirituality highlight the inherent resilience of these societies. The notion of community transcends biological connections, highlighting the significance of interpersonal bonds and networks of assistance. Overall, this study offers valuable perspectives on the complex aspects of indigenous existence, enhancing our comprehension of cultural conservation, adaptability, and welfare within these communities.

Keywords: indigenous communities, cultural resilience, traditions, legacy, tribal rituals

Introduction

There exists a paucity of scholarly investigations that have undertaken the exploration of ethnic and cultural identity within the cohort of tribal students of Indian states. The prevailing body of research predominantly adopts a quantitative approach, wherein it elucidates outcomes pertaining to ethnic identity and its impact on various facets such as well-being, mental health, substance abuse, and other health-related indicators within this specific demographic. These studies consistently reveal modest or negligible associations between ethnic identity and the aforementioned outcomes (Huguley et al., 2019). In light of these aforementioned discoveries and notable deficiencies within the existing body of knowledge, there persists a robust theoretical and practi[1]cal fascination with the ethnic and cultural identity of tribal youth belonging to diverse racial backgrounds (Hernandez & Murakami, 2016). This enduring interest stems from the underlying belief that culture plays a pivotal role in fostering elevated levels of physical and mental well-being, as well as facilitating more favourable outcomes in various domains. The ongoing discourse surrounding the optimal approach to delineating and

*Research Scholar, Department of Sociology and Social Work, Annamalai University, Tamil Nadu
Associate Professor, Department Of Sociology And Social Work, Annamalai University, Tamil Nadu

quantifying culture and ethnicity at large, as well as the intricate facets of cultural, ethnic, and racial identification, has persisted.

Ethnicity exhibits a profound correlation with culture, denoting as it does the assemblage of individuals who share distinctive cultural attributes that set them apart from other groups of people (Eriksen, 2020). These collective group attributes may encompass linguistic characteristics, geographical positioning or ancestral provenance, religious affiliations, historical consciousness, customary practises, core principles, convictions, and dietary preferences.

Based on the 2001 census data of India, it is observed that the population of Scheduled Tribes residing in the state of Kerala amounts to 3,64,189 individuals (Veluchamy, 2019). This population is further categorised into two distinct subgroups, namely lunas, comprising 180,169 individuals, and felunas, encompassing 184,020 individuals. Wayanad boasts the most substantial population of indigenous peoples, with a staggering count of 136,062 individuals. Idukki, with a population of 50,973, and Palakkad, with a population of 39,665, represent the subsequent two districts that predominantly harbour the indigenous tribal communities within the state. The Paniya, also known as Paniyar, represent the most populous among the 36 prominent tribal communities. Various tribes uphold distinct customs, traditions, social structures, and ecological interconnections that significantly contribute to the overall diversity (V. A., 2015).

Nevertheless, in light of the onset of the British colonial epoch, the inception of transportation networks effectively facilitated ingress to this specific locale, thereby engendering the emergence of commercial plantations. As a result, there was a notable surge in the arrival of colonisers, predominantly in the 1940s, leading to a considerable dislocation of the native populace, commonly known as aborigines or adivasis (Gupta, 2005). The indigenous communities have regrettably undergone the displacement of their ancestral territories, leading to a reduction in their population, which presently constitutes a mere 20 percent of the overall demographic within the district.

Urbanisation, in addition to its multifaceted implications, notably engenders a discernible augmentation in the heterogeneity observed within tribal communities, as approximately 10% of the populace is reputedly residing in urban localities. Adverse and coerced encounters with the prevailing cultural milieu, encompassing subjugation, prejudice, linguistic erosion, and displacement from ancestral territories, have inflicted profound harm and significantly impeded the cultivation of cultural encounters. Notwithstanding the aforementioned circumstances, the enduring presence of tribal cultural traditions, values, and practises persists, thereby bestowing upon this community a remarkable capacity for resilience. Thus, the objective of this study is to examine and assess the complex relationship between social and emotional competency and the educational ambitions of tribal students. The goal is to discover the crucial components that either enable or impede the achievement of goals within the distinct framework of Empowering Dreams.

Literature review

The literature has extensively documented a diverse range of sociocultural characteristics and strengths exhibited by various tribal groups, which serve to distinguish them from both other ethnic minority groups and the prevailing dominant culture. Certain literature has been known to designate these particular attributes as "Indian" due to their prevalence among a significant multitude of tribal collectives. The indigenous communities are profoundly influenced by tribal values, which serve as a compass for their conduct and daily existence (Verbos et al., 2011).

These values encompass a profound reverence for spirituality, an unwavering respect for the earth and its natural elements, and a steadfast conviction in the symbiotic relationship between individuals and nature (McRitchie et al., 2011). This interdependence is deemed indispensable for the cultivation of optimal mental and physical well-being. The study meticulously examined and scrutinised a collection of 22 scholarly articles pertaining to the cultural virtues of Idukki community. Through this rigors analysis, they were able to establish a comprehensive inventory of 42 distinct cultural strengths, which were subsequently categorised into 10 overarching themes of great significance. Among the various strengths identified, it is noteworthy to mention that the ones most commonly referenced include the presence of an extended family network, a deep-rooted sense of spirituality, robust social connections, a strong cultural identity, adherence to child care customs, preservation of traditions, the sharing of stories, and the practise of kinship and mutual assistance.

The quantification of ethnic and cultural identity has consistently posed considerable difficulties and intricacies within ethnic minority communities (Mu, 2015). One fundamental rationale lies in the fact that the majority of identity metrics adhere to the underlying assumptions of linear cultural models, which perceive individuals as existing along a spectrum or undergoing a state of flux between different cultural contexts (Gioia et al., 2013).

The quantification of ethnic and cultural identity has consistently posed a formidable and intricate task within the realm of ethnic minority communities. One fundamental rationale stems from the fact that the majority of identity metrics adhere to the underlying principles of linear cultural identification models, which perceive individuals as existing on a spectrum or in a state of flux between various cultures (Cohen, 2012). A comprehensive exploration of the available literary resources pertaining to ethnic and cultural identity instruments has yielded a total of seven instruments that specifically centre on the intricate facets of tribal identity. Although each of the seven instruments demonstrated certain facets of Indian culture as delineated in the existing literature, encompassing aspects such as language, values, behaviour, and cultural attitudes, none of them appeared to encapsulate all the crucial elements in their entirety (Thomas & Peterson, 2016).

One of the instruments devised for the purpose of quantifying Indian identity was a scale formulated by Mohatt and Blue (1982), which aimed to evaluate the concept of Tiospaye, or the extent of adherence to traditional values and customs within the Lakota Sioux nation (Noisy Hawk, 2015). Morris, Crowley, and Thomas (2002) have notably contributed to the field of research by devising an instrument that effectively gauges the level of traditionalism prevalent within Indian children and families (Keenan et al., 2016). The aforementioned instrument, consisting of 96 items, is designed to assess the level of traditionalism in individuals of various age groups, including children and adults. It delves into four distinct dimensions of traditionalism, namely language proficiency, familiarity with historical traditions, knowledge of tribal customs and folklore, and the extent of identification with traditional healing ceremonies and rituals associated with life transitions.. This particular survey serves the purpose of gauging diverse facets of acculturation, encompassing language (both preference and usage), educational and occupational standing, blood quantum, social conduct, social affiliation and engagements, value orientation, as well as cultural attitudes. The Orthogonal Cultural Identification Measure, as developed by Oetting and Beauvais in 2010, distinguishes itself from the Rosebud instrument through its evaluation of biculturalism and individual perspectives pertaining to Indian culture, mainstream culture, or a fusion of both Indian and mainstream cultures (Stonefish & Kwantes, 2017). It primarily centres its attention on the extent of engagement in cultural pursuits, while also encompassing three additional dimensions of culture: cultural affinity, identity, family involvement, and traditional activities.

Method

This methodology involves a mixed-methods approach, emphasizing qualitative data collection through focus groups and interviews. The sample is stratified based on age groups and educational levels, with consideration given to diverse perspectives and experiences. Informed consent is obtained, and local coordinators play a role in facilitating data collection. A Sampling Population of 240 tribal children from Idukki town in the Wayanad district of Kerala was selected. Stratified Random Sampling with Strata of Age groups (10-13, 14-17, 18-21), attending different educational levels (high school, higher secondary school, colleges).

Data Collection: Conducted with the selected participants from different age groups and educational levels.

Data Analyses

The table 1 provides insights into the distribution of educational levels across different age groups, educational status of the surveyed population.

Table 1 Educational status of the respondent

		educational status of the respondent				Total
		5-10th	10-12th	undergraduate	diploma	
AgeRange	10 - 13	32	9	8	0	49
	14 - 17	14	57	0	7	78
	18 - 21	0	21	77	15	113
Total		46	87	85	22	240

The majority of respondents in the 10-13 age range are still in the early stages of education. The 14-17 age range shows a significant number of respondents who have completed education up to the 10-12th grade level. The 18-21 age range predominantly consists of individuals pursuing undergraduate education.

The initial report presents the results obtained from conducting focus groups with participants belonging to three different age groups: 10-13, 14-17, and 18-21. Subsequently, the outcomes of the three open-ended questions posed to these groups are presented. A grand total of six primary themes and seventeen secondary themes were discovered. The study identified six prominent themes: traditions, legacy, physical and language traits, values, adversity, and community. An analysis was conducted to determine the frequency of statements in each major area. The results showed the following: legacy (n = 50), physical traits and language (n = 40), traditions (n = 36), values (n = 35), hardship (n = 23), family and community support (n = 21).

The six categories were established for the purpose of this study in table 2. Traditions encompass the transmission of beliefs and traditions by oral communication or demonstration, with a particular emphasis on rituals, ceremonies, cuisine, and beliefs. Legacy primarily include historical data and inherited elements, including land ownership, the amalgamation of cultures, societal norms and expectations, cultural conflicts between different groups, tensions between urban and reservation areas, as well as the transmission of stories and legends. Physical attributes and linguistic proficiency encompass the comprehension and articulation of indigenous languages, as well as the shared physical qualities of Native American individuals. The values emphasised concepts and ideals that were seen desirable, including guidelines for self-conduct and interpersonal interactions.

Table 2 Ranking of the Most Frequent Themes and Sub-Themes by Group

Major themes	5-10th	10-12th	Undergraduate/ diploma	Total
Traditions	19	9	5	33
Ceremonies/rituals	10	9	0	19
Food	9	0	5	14
Legacy	7	0	0	7
Urban-reservation tension	0	6	0	6
Mixing of cultures	7	5	9	21
Stories and legends	0	0	7	7
Physical and language characteristics	18	n/a	9	27
Language	18	0	9	9
Hardship	0	16	0	16
Confusion, shame, trauma	0	10	0	10
Discrimination and limited resources	0	6	0	6
Family and community support	0	6	8	14

The fundamental principles encompassed respect, resilience, religious beliefs, diligence, cooperation, altruism, self-esteem, spirituality, and wit. The enquiry focused on the significance of laughing and humour among indigenous students. The hardship primarily revolves on perplexity and humiliation, scarcity of resources, as well as prejudice and psychological distress. Ultimately, the concept of community included allusions to familial ties, communal assistance, and a sense of belonging.

The data collected from various focus groups revealed several intriguing patterns among the tribal community.

Traditions

The youth recognised certain customs, rites, and rituals that were essential components of tribal cultures. The young individuals emphasized the significance of rituals such as coming out ceremonies, tribal dancing, singing, and artistic activities like jewellery making and basket weaving in their interactions with their tribal community. They stated that their knowledge of these rites and traditions was frequently acquired from older members of their families, such as grandparents and uncles.

A single undergraduate individual expressed that he predominantly acquired knowledge of customs and ceremonies during his visits to the ancestral reservation. He expressed that his family had the expectation for him to uphold their customs and teachings, and he felt a strong sense of duty to fulfil these familial obligations, even if it meant sacrificing his own aspirations and desires. "I acquired knowledge primarily from my uncles and grandfather, with a smaller contribution from my grandmother." My relatives have the responsibility of instructing me.

Individuals of various educational backgrounds deliberated about the advantages of preserving and embracing the abundant cultural customs within tribal societies. They expressed experiencing a profound sense of empowerment and connectedness via the observance of rituals. Several individuals deliberated about the role of traditions, rituals, and ceremonies in fostering the well-being and development of future generations within Indian communities.

Legacy

The significance of the legacy to indigenous communities was a frequent motif among participants. Participants expressed a sense of being firmly rooted and attached to a safe and steady home or place of origin. The group's collective trauma and loss seems to be influenced by the impact of oppression, pre-independent colonialism, and the subsequent displacement. Participants provided illustrations of significant aspects of Indian heritage, including the transmission of culture, distinctions among reservation individuals, intergroup friction, and the advantage of fluidly transitioning in and out of cultural norms as required. A diploma holder expressed a feeling of pride regarding the historical fact that tribal people were the first residents of Kerala. "We arrived here before anyone else." Since long ago, I have consistently experienced gratitude for being created by God and for the fact that God considered our existence.

Physical/Language Characteristics

The people interviewed also recognised linguistic and physical attributes as distinguishing traits in tribal individuals. Facial characteristics served as a distinguishing factor for identifying tribal affiliation, in addition to tribal languages and variations in vocal tones and accents.

Values, beliefs, and standards have been instilled and strengthened in tribal societies. The participants conveyed that family, altruism, accountability, spirituality, self-esteem, and defiance were significant values. Respect was the predominant value emphasised by youth. Nevertheless, the appreciation for children, as well as for others and the environment, was also considered a crucial principle. Showing deference to individuals who are older than you. "That was one of the initial lessons imparted by your parents to urban kids," 12th standard student.

The community category encompassed feedback pertaining to both family and community matters. The participants discussed the significance of having connections with both biological and non-biological individuals who are regarded as family, emphasising the need of support and a sense of belonging. "There is a possibility that you are not biologically or genetically connected. Although they may not be related to you by blood, you nevertheless regard them as your family. - Youth doing his diploma in mechanical engineering.

Discussion

The focus groups' findings provide insight into the complex nature of indigenous communities, highlighting the core principles that shape the lives of tribal individuals. Respect has become a widely recognised value that emphasises the significance of acknowledging and honouring not just older individuals, but also fellow members of the community, children, and the environment. This idea is in line with the larger concept of interconnectedness within the community, where the connections go beyond just biological relationships.

Resilience emerged as a significant principle, demonstrated in the face of numerous challenges such as limited resources, discrimination, and psychological difficulties. The recognition by participants of the importance of rituals and traditions in promoting resilience indicates a

complex relationship between cultural practises and psychological well-being. The importance placed by young people on customs such as coming-out ceremonies, tribal dancing, and artistic activities highlights the meaningful role these rituals play in fostering a sense of identity and belonging.

The participants' narratives were deeply influenced by their religious beliefs and spirituality, which were closely intertwined. They often made references to ancestral teachings and expressed a profound connection to the land. The recurring theme that emerged was the legacy of indigenous communities, which is deeply rooted in historical experiences. The participants' collective identity and sense of pride in their heritage were deeply influenced by historical traumas, such as oppression and displacement, which had a tangible impact.

The cultural knowledge is passed down from older generations to the youth. We emphasised the important role that family members, especially grandparents and uncles, play in teaching essential customs and lessons. The act of passing down traditions plays a crucial role in maintaining the continuity of tribal cultures. It fosters a sense of responsibility among the younger generation, as they recognise the importance of preserving and upholding these practises.

Distinguishing traits such as language and physical characteristics were acknowledged, highlighting the visual and auditory indicators that define the identity of different tribes. The participants' recognition of the significance of linguistic and physical attributes demonstrates their understanding of how these factors contribute to the preservation of cultural uniqueness.

The participants discussed how the community extended beyond biological connections, including both family members and non-biological individuals. The significance of support networks and a sense of belonging in the lives of tribal individuals is emphasised by this inclusive definition of community. The emphasis placed on relationships with others, regardless of familial bonds, underscores the interdependence and mutual support that define tribal communities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, study shed light on the complex web of values, traditions, and challenges that exist within indigenous communities. The resilience that is developed through cultural practises, the significance of preserving traditions, and the strong connections within the community all contribute to a vibrant and ever-evolving fabric that influences the everyday lives of tribal individuals.

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