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Contemporary Challenges to the Survival of Folk Culture In Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

Folk culture constitutes the living heritage of Tamil Nadu, deeply rooted in the everyday lives, beliefs, rituals, and artistic expressions of its people. Folk songs, dances, rituals, oral narratives, traditional medicine, crafts, and village customs have historically functioned as carriers of collective memory and cultural identity. However, in contemporary Tamil Nadu, folk culture faces serious challenges due to rapid urbanization, industrialization, globalization, digital media influence, and socio-economic transformations. This study examines the major challenges affecting the survival of folk culture in Tamil Nadu and analyzes how traditional practices are being marginalized, transformed, or commercialized in modern contexts. Using qualitative and interpretative methods, the research highlights the declining transmission of folk knowledge, changing lifestyles, loss of patronage, and weakening of community-based cultural systems. The study argues that despite these challenges, folk culture continues to adapt and survive through cultural resilience, institutional support, and conscious preservation efforts. The paper emphasizes the urgent need for documentation, policy intervention, and community participation to sustain Tamil Nadu's folk cultural heritage.

Keywords: Folk Culture, Tamil Nadu, Cultural Change, Globalization, Oral Traditions, Cultural Heritage, Modernization.

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Introduction

Folk culture represents the most intimate and organic form of cultural expression, evolving naturally within communities through shared experiences, beliefs, and practices. In Tamil Nadu, folk culture manifests in diverse forms such as village deity worship, folk songs, dances like Karagattam and Oyilattam, oral epics, rituals, traditional medicine, crafts, and customary practices. These traditions have historically played a vital role in maintaining social harmony, moral values, and collective identity.

In recent decades, Tamil Nadu has undergone rapid socio-economic transformation. Urban expansion, technological advancement, formal education, and mass media exposure have altered traditional ways of life. As a result, folk culture—once central to community life—is increasingly perceived as outdated or irrelevant by younger generations. This paper explores the challenges faced by folk culture in contemporary Tamil Nadu and examines the factors contributing to its gradual decline.

Concept of Folk Culture

Folk culture refers to the traditional knowledge, beliefs, customs, rituals, art forms, and practices transmitted orally across generations within a community. It is community-centered, informal, and closely linked to local ecology, occupation, and social structure. Unlike classical or elite culture, folk culture is participatory and dynamic, continuously adapting to social change.

In Tamil Nadu, folk culture reflects agrarian life, ecological wisdom, and spiritual beliefs associated with nature, fertility, protection, and community well-being. Its survival depends largely on intergenerational transmission and collective participation.

Folk Culture in the Tamil Context

Tamil folk culture includes:

- Folk beliefs and rituals associated with village deities and ancestral worship
- Oral traditions such as folk songs, ballads, proverbs, and myths
- Performing arts like Therukoothu, Villupattu, and Kummi
- Material culture including crafts, pottery, weaving, tattoos, and traditional attire
- Indigenous knowledge systems such as folk medicine and ecological practices

These cultural expressions are deeply embedded in everyday life and social relationships, making folk culture an essential component of Tamil identity.

Major Challenges to the Survival of Folk Culture

Urbanization and Migration

Rapid urbanization has led to large-scale migration from rural areas to cities. As people move away from village settings, the communal spaces that nurtured folk practices disappear. Urban life prioritizes individualism over community participation, weakening the social base required for folk traditions to flourish.

Influence of Globalization and Mass Media

Global cultural flows and digital media have introduced new lifestyles, entertainment forms, and value systems. Folk arts struggle to compete with cinema, television, and social media, resulting in reduced interest among younger generations. Traditional performances are often replaced by modern music and popular culture.

Decline in Intergenerational Transmission

Folk culture survives through oral transmission. However, formal education systems emphasize standardized knowledge, leaving little space for indigenous traditions. Elders who possess folk knowledge often lack platforms to pass it on, leading to cultural discontinuity.

Economic Marginalization of Folk Artists

Many folk artists and artisans face economic insecurity. Lack of stable income, patronage, and institutional support forces practitioners to abandon traditional occupations. Folk art becomes a secondary activity rather than a sustainable livelihood.

Commercialization and Cultural Dilution

In some cases, folk culture is preserved only in a commercialized or staged form for tourism and media consumption. While this provides visibility, it often strips traditions of their original meaning, ritual context, and community relevance.

Changing Belief Systems and Ritual Practices

Scientific rationalism, religious reform movements, and modern healthcare systems have altered traditional belief structures. Folk rituals related to healing, fertility, and protection are increasingly questioned or abandoned, leading to cultural erosion.

Impact of Modern Lifestyle on Folk Culture

Modern lifestyles prioritize speed, efficiency, and technological engagement. Traditional ceremonies, seasonal festivals, and collective rituals are viewed as time-consuming or impractical. Nuclear family structures further reduce communal participation, weakening the social fabric essential for folk cultural practices.

Adaptation and Resilience of Folk Culture

Despite these challenges, folk culture in Tamil Nadu has not completely disappeared. Instead, it has shown remarkable resilience through:

- Adaptation of folk arts to contemporary themes
- Inclusion of folk performances in academic curricula
- Documentation through digital archives and research projects
- Revival movements led by cultural organizations and artists

These efforts indicate that folk culture continues to evolve rather than remain static.

Role of Institutions and Policy

Government bodies, universities, cultural academies, and NGOs play a crucial role in safeguarding folk culture. Policy measures such as financial support for artists, inclusion of folk studies in education, and recognition of folk traditions as intangible cultural heritage can significantly contribute to cultural preservation.

Findings and Discussion

The study finds that the survival of folk culture in contemporary Tamil Nadu is threatened primarily by socio-economic changes and cultural homogenization. However, community-driven initiatives and institutional interventions offer hope for revival. Folk culture remains relevant when it adapts without losing its core values and meanings.

Conclusion

Folk culture is a vital component of Tamil Nadu's cultural identity and social history. The challenges it faces today are not merely cultural but also economic and structural. Preserving folk culture requires collective responsibility involving communities, scholars, policymakers, and cultural practitioners. Sustainable preservation must focus not only on performance and display but also on revitalizing the social contexts in which folk culture naturally thrives.

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