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Women, Ritual, And Identity: A Study Of Tribal Women's Participation In The Dhemsa Dance Of Odisha

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Abstract

Dhemsa dance forms an energetic and permanent element of the culture of the tribal groups of southern Odisha and, more specifically, of the Koraput area. While extant scholarship often characterizes Dhemsa as a communal performance of tribal nature, it does not sufficiently explore the central role of women in preserving its ritualistic, social, and cultural relevance. This study examines the role of tribal women in Dhemsa dance in terms of the role of the dance as a medium of ritual practice, community bonding, and identity construction. Employing qualitative methods—including ethnographic observation, semi-structured interviews, and a secondary literature analysis—the paper examines the role of women as performers, as transmitters of tradition, and as custodians of cultural memory. The paper argues that Dhemsa is not simply a performative art form, but it is a lived cultural practice through which tribal women exercise their agency, reinforce social cohesion, and ensure intergenerational continuity of indigenous knowledge. Through a foregrounding of the participation of women, the paper is a contribution to wider discourse on the topics of gender, culture, and tribal identity in contemporary India.

Keywords- Dhemsa Dance; Tribal Women; Ritual and Culture; Gender and Identity; Indigenous Traditions; Odisha

Introduction

The diversity of Indian culture is deeply rooted in the traditions and practices of its indigenous communities. Among these, tribal dances have an important place in being living expressions of social organization, ritual belief, ecological consciousness, and collective identity. In Odisha, especially in the southern districts like Koraput, Rayagada, and some parts of Nabarangpur, Dhemsa dance is a very prominent tribal culture form that is performed in festivals, agricultural cycles, social gatherings, and ritual occasions. Dhemsa is well known as the symbol of unity, joy, and cultural continuity among the tribal people like Gond, Paraja, Bhumia, Koya, etc.

While Dhemsa dance has been the subject of descriptive ethnographic documentation, scholarly engagement has been largely focused on musical patterns, choreography, and the communal nature of Dhemsa dance. The role of women, however, has been subsumed in more collective narratives; perhaps because of this, their particular contributions, experiences, and agency have been relatively neglected. Tribal women aren't passive actors in Dhemsa but primary players in its performance, survival, and transmission from one generation to the next. Their bodily movements, rhythmical coordination, and ritual engagement are indicative of deeper meanings relating to gender roles, social values, and identity formation within tribal societies.

The Odishi tribal communities represent a culturally diverse and rich community of people with around 62 diverse tribal communities that uphold the practices of music, dance, and rituals [1]. The Paroja and Gadaba tribes of the Koraput district are some of such communities that have preserved unique cultural practices, which are an expression of their worldview, social structure, and spirituality. The core of these rituals is the Dhemsa dance, a communal performance performed by women who play a central role in both the entertainment and the ritual aspects.

The Dhemsa depicts a special place in the cultural context of the tribal inhabitants of Odisha. Dhemsa is a gendered performance space since, unlike most folk dances where both genders are involved, it is done by women, which carries significant consequences concerning the role, identity creation, and the social aspect of participation in such societies [2]. The Dhemsa nach is mainly performed by young and old Paroja women to entertain and also to attend the community events, and Gadaba women also perform the same dance during their traditional festivals and rites [2], [3].

Dhemsa dance research provides a piece of valuable information about the complicated relationships between the ritual activity, gender roles, and cultural identity among tribal women in Odisha. This report discusses three aspects of women's involvement in Dhemsa that are interrelated with each other: the ritual and cultural importance of the practice in Paroja and Gadaba communities, the influence of this practice on the formation of gender roles and identity, and the overall socio-cultural context in which the lives and cultural practices of women are placed. Through such dimensions, the current study adds to the concept of how traditional performance practices serve as the location of cultural continuity, social cohesion, and identity formation in the modern tribal societies. The discussion is based on ethnography of tribal communities in Koraput and western Odisha; cultural studies of folk dance traditions; and research studies on the social conditions of tribal women. Although the direct ethnographic record of Dhemsa is not abundant in the academic literature, there is some evidence found in the works on the Paroja and Gadaba communities to paint an overall picture of the multifaceted meaning of this women-focused cultural practice.

This paper aims to bring tribal women's role in Dhemsa dance to the foreground and to explore the place of the dance as a site for ritual practice, social bonding, and cultural identity. By taking a gender-sensitive perspective, the purpose of the study is to go beyond the surface of described information and investigate Dhemsa as a cultural practice lived and practiced by which tribal women negotiate the tradition, community belonging, and continuity. In so doing, the paper adds to wider academic debates on indigenous knowledge systems, women's cultural agency, and the politics of representation in tribal studies.

Review of Literature

Scholarly engagement with tribal dance traditions in India has been mostly the result of the disciplines of anthropology, folklore studies, and cultural history. Early works of ethnography mainly focused on documentation of indigenous art forms as markers of tribal identity, ritual life, and social organization. However, these studies tended to approach dance as a cultural expression in which people participate collectively, with little regard to the participation of men and women and their agency. The present review synthesizes the available literature related to tribal dance, Dhemsa dance, and the role of women in the indigenous cultural practices to place the current study in a wider academic discourse.

Tribal Dance and Cultural Expression

Several scholars have emphasized dance as an integral part of tribal life in the form of a medium of ritual communication, social cohesion, and cultural continuity. Roy (2012) emphasizes the fact that tribal dances are inseparable from daily life and relate to agricultural cycles, religious beliefs, and their relationship with their environment. Similarly, Mohanty (2010) contends that folk and tribal dances in Odisha are embedded in community rituals, rather than separate individualistic artistic performances. These studies highlight the group nature of tribal dance but almost completely ignore the differentiated roles men and women play in these practices.

Chakraborty (2015) conceptualizes tribal dance as a performative space where social values and relations of power are played out. According to this perspective, dance is not only a form of entertainment but also a form of representing shared meaning and a way of reinforcing group identity. While this approach makes it possible to discuss gender analysis, it does not adequately discuss women's embodied experiences within dance traditions like Dhemsa.

Studies on Dhemsa Dance

Studies that specifically focus on Dhemsa dance are limited and primarily descriptive. Existing literature often records its origin, musical instruments, and the structure of performance. Mohanty (2010) identifies Dhemsa as a significant cultural indicator of the tribes of southern Odisha, with a special reference to its use in festivals, marriages, and community meetings. Behura (2008) places Dhemsa in a similar context in the ritual life of tribes like the Gond and Paraja as a means of preserving social harmony and cultural identity.

However, these studies tend to show Dhemsa in a manner that represents a homogeneous collective practice, without much discussion about the internal social dynamics. Women's participation is often

mentioned but not analyzed. As a result, women's cultural labor in perpetuating Dhemsa has been under-theorized. This gap calls for specific research on gender-specific roles in Dhemsa dance traditions.

Women, Culture, and Indigenous Knowledge

Wider studies on tribal societies have explored how women preserve and transmit indigenous culture. Devi (2017) argues that tribal women act as important agents of cultural continuity through oral traditions, rituals, and daily practices. These findings are especially relevant to dance traditions, where the transmission of knowledge is through observation, imitation, and participation in a group.

Xaxa (2005) emphasizes that the cultural roles of tribal women are often made invisible in mainstream academic and policy discourse, despite their centrality to the community life. His work demands a change from the passive position of women being bearers of tradition to the active role of women as cultural producers. This outlook gives an important conceptual basis to discuss women's participation in Dhemsa dance.

Nayak (2018) goes further in examining the gender and performance in eastern Indian tribal societies, where she suggests that dance gives room to women to negotiate identity, belonging, and social recognition. According to Nayak, performance spaces can reinforce tradition while also providing subtle forms of agency. This insight is especially helpful to understand Dhemsa as a ritual practice and as a place of gendered expression.

Dance, Identity, and Performance Theory

From a theoretical perspective, I should add that performance scholars are suggesting that dance is a form of embodied knowledge in which identity is performed and reproduced. Dance, in this sense, becomes a cultural text that communicates meanings in excess of the verbal language. Chakraborty (2015) and Roy (2012) make similar suggestions that tribal dances contain encoded social memory and collective identity through body movement and rhythm.

Applying this framework to Dhemsa dance makes it possible to analyze the way in which tribal women represent the cultural values and social roles through their performance. However, available research rarely combines performance theory with gender analysis regarding tribal dance. This methodological gap restricts the knowledge of the ways women's bodies become a site of cultural inscription and of identity formation.

Research Gap

A review of the existing literature shows a significant gap in scholarly research regarding the Dhemsa dance concerning gender. While several studies have recognized the significance of Dhemsa as a cultural as well as a ritual practice, very few have critically analyzed the specific roles of tribal women in its performance, transmission, and transformation. Women's agency, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and identity formation through Dhemsa dance have still not been thoroughly explored. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a focused and gender-sensitive study of the role played by tribals, especially women, in the Dhemsa dance of Odisha. By combining elements of cultural anthropology, gender studies, and performance theory, the research adds to a more complex understanding of indigenous cultural practices and draws attention to the centrality of women in the maintenance of tribal heritage.

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the culture and ritual meaning of the Dhemsa dance in the tribal group of Odisha.
2. To analyze the role of tribal women in the performance and transmission of Dhemsa dance.
3. To make a contribution to gender-sensitive perspectives in tribal cultural studies.

Research Questions

1. What roles do tribal women play in the performance and continuation of Dhemsa dance?
2. How does Dhemsa dance work as a ritual and social practice of tribal women?
3. How does Dhemsa dance define and express the cultural identity of tribal women?

Dhemsa Dance: Cultural and Ritual Context

Dhemsa as Community Ritual

Dhemsa is both a women-oriented and community-based performance that strengthens social ties and community cohesion among the Paroja and Gadaba tribes. The dancing is part of the ritual life of these societies, and it is performed in traditional festivals and social events that outline significant events within the community calendar [3]. This is a social aspect, which separates Dhemsa and ritual practice in individual or family circles, making it a community practice that unites women of all ages and kin links.

The religious life of the Gadaba tribe is manifested in rich folk traditions of songs, dance, music, rituals, and celebrations that can be observed throughout the year and introduce vivid hues into their lives. They are closely tied to religion and their vision of the world [4]. Dhemsa is one of a group of performance traditions within the wider ritual scene that makes community life meaningful and gives social structure solidarity [4]. The involvement of kin members, friends, and well-wishers in the rituals of Gadaba, as reported in the secondary mortuary rituals, demonstrates the way group rituals can be used to strengthen the group cohesion [5]. This is the same social logic that Dhemsa engages in: she uses the collective mobilization of women to make her community strong.

Dhemsa nach is a form of young and old women's performance in the Paroja, which is both entertaining and participatory in nature [2]. Such a dualism reflects the inclusion of the dance into the fabric of community life, serving as both a performance in front of others and a participatory experience for dancers. The team performance aspect develops a common experience that is not reliant upon personal expression but rather belonging and acknowledging each other.

Spiritual and Symbolic Levels.

Although the evidence presented does not specify the ritual theology or cosmological mythology associated with the Dhemsa dance, it is part of the larger phenomenon of spiritual and symbolic practices within the tribal communities of Odisha. Dances in Odisha are usually strongly tied to religion, and several of them are associated with celebrations of harvests and ritual performances toward a successful harvest [6]. Spiritual meanings of dance among the tribal Odisha can also be supported by the Dalkhai

dance, which is connected with the fertility goddess and is a religion-based folk dance of the Adivasi communities [7].

The symbolic aspects of women dancing in the tribal setting are not restricted to the recognition of religious dogma but rather to the larger ideas of fertility, social adulthood, and deity relations. The Dalkhai dance is a dance performed in western Odisha, which is traditionally linked to puberty rituals of unmarried girls, and it introduces young women into social and biological maturity [8]. Although the ritual meanings of Dhemsas might vary, the overall ritual carried out by women of all ages indicates that it has a similar role of marking and celebrating the social roles and stages of life in women.

The use of traditional attire in Dhemsas performances enhances its symbolic meaning. Gadaba women use the Kerang saree as their cultural dress, and the traditional dress is also depicted in the descriptions of the customary practices of Gadaba women [3]. Costume, movement, and music are used as the visual and material aspects of performance to produce a multisensory ritual experience and thus become the identifiers of the cultural identity, which links the participants to traditional practices of their ancestors.

The third category is seasonal and lifecycle links.

Folk performances in Odisha form an inseparable part of the religious and spiritual life of groups of people since they are used to appease deities, celebrate seasons, and commemorate agricultural cycles [9]. Although the exact calendrical location of Dhemsas is only marginally recorded in the surviving literature, the fact that the dance was performed on the occasion of traditional festivals suggests that it has become part of the seasonal and lifecycle cycle of performance of the Paroja and Gadaba communities [3].

Many Odishi folk dances are determined by the agrarian setting of tribal life in Odisha that determines their time and meaning. Examples of such dances include Karma, which is dedicated to the Goddess Karamsani, and rites of worshipping branches of Karma, e.g., as a symbol of respecting nature and fertility [9]. In analog, it is likely that Dhemsas is also involved in similar seasonal cycles, but few corroborative data associating it specifically with specific agricultural or calendrical connections exist and could be extended by more ethnographic research. The Dhemsas cross-generational engagement can be viewed as the lifecycle aspect of Dhemsas. The direct documentation shows that both young and older women of Paroja resort to Dhemsas nach, proving that the dance is not limited to any particular stage of their lives but is actually an ongoing routine practiced by women throughout their lives [2]. This trend indicates that Dhemsas is a tool for socializing the younger women into the community customs and at the same time providing the older women with the continued possibilities of cultural expression and socialization.

Gender Roles and Identity Formation.

Women-Centered Performance Space.

Dhemsas creates a very specific gendered performance field where women become the main subjects of visible stage work as the practitioners of culture and the participants of rituals. The written fact that Dhemsas is a ceremony of women alone makes it a gendered cultural practice that devotes the publicity of the rite performance to women in Paroja and Gadaba cultures [2, 3]. This effect of performance space in gendering carries significant implications in grasping social roles and cultural authority of women in these societies.

This making of women-friendly performance spaces by means of dance is not new to Dhemsa; the phenomenon is a general tendency in folk traditions where gender determines participation and meaning. The existence of comparative evidence is based on other contexts and shows that the role of women in traditional dance can break the historical exclusions and open new spaces in cultural expression. An example of this is the Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal of West Bengal with its masked dance theatre used to challenge archaic community practices that previously denied women their right to be involved in cultural activities, thus challenging social oppression and general subjection [10]. Although the historical path of Dhemsa is different—specifically, it is a practice that includes women rather than excludes them—its role as a women-focused performance space also provides women with cultural visibility and collective agency.

The gendering of Dhemsa performance provides women with the space to learn and express cultural competency, artistic ability, and social order. The group dance demands collaboration, time, and understanding between the participants; hence, it builds group relationships and appreciation of each other. This cooperative aspect of performance tends to build up the identity of women as members of culture and community.

Dhemsa dance is traditionally danced in circular or semicircular formations, accompanied by indigenous musical instruments like dhol, mandar, and tamak. The circular pattern is not just aesthetically pleasing but symbolic and represents equality, unity, and the cyclical nature of life. Participants move in synchronized steps, holding each other's hands or shoulders, forming a visual metaphor of collective harmony.

Ritualistically, Dhemsa is closely related to agricultural practices, change of seasons, and festivals in the community. It is usually performed during events such as harvesting, weddings, community feasts, and religious ceremonies of village deities. The dance is therefore a medium for the expression and reinforcement of spiritual beliefs, ecological awareness, and social cohesion. The participation of women in Dhemsa is especially important with regard to rituals. In many tribal communities, women are considered carriers of fertility, prosperity, and continuity. Their presence in ritual dances symbolizes abundance, well-being, and strength among the people. The rhythms of Dhemsa are often the rhythms of everyday tribal life, particularly those of women's labor in agriculture, gathering in the forest, and managing the home. Consequently, Dhemsa can be considered an embodied image of women's lived experiences in tribal society.

Tribal Women and Cultural Involvement

Dhemsa gives women a visible and structured collective identity that cuts across the larger identity pressures that tribal women in Odisha face. Public performance helps put women in a community context where they share a common cultural identity, thus strengthening belonging and intergenerational transmission [2]. The kind of visibility that Dhemsa performance grants is in contrast to the social roles of tribal women, which in other spheres of life are usually very restricted. Odisha tribal women are in contradictory social positions. While some tribal groups, such as the Kondh, have been identified as experiencing relatively low rates of gender discrimination and have active female participation in decision-making processes [11], other evidence suggests that women face significant restrictions in their autonomy, education, and economic power. Up in the region, tribal women are faced with such problems as low literacy rates, poor health, lack of access to productive resources, and lack of access to decision-making and political processes [12]. Under such a climate of limited possibilities, cultural activities like Dhemsa create crucial platforms through which women express themselves collectively as they gain

social appreciation. The identity-creating role of the Dhemsa is on more than one level. On a personal level, dance involvement can be associated with personal and emotional growth; the results of the research of classical dancers show that dance participation helps one become socially mature and express oneself [13]. Collectively, Odishi group dances are used to carry the tradition and group identity, meaning that recurrent engagement has the implication of socializing women into being communal members and sharing collective cultural meaning [2]. The observable way women perform Dhemsa at the community level helps to represent publicly the depiction of tribal identity, hence identifying the cultural difference and continuity in the community. Particularly important is the correlation between the dance participation and identity formation in the circumstances when the tribal identity per se is also a subject of argumentation or pressure. The tribal women in Odisha are faced with identity confusion and lack of rights since they are not aware of them [14]. The cultural practices that can be physically practiced to promote tribal identity become all the more important in this milieu as signs of belonging and continuity of cultures. The Dhemsa performance tradition, which is dominated by women, plays a crucial role in enabling women to both reproduce and represent tribal identity. The continuation of Dhemsa for a new generation faces problems in the modern environment. The tribal communities in Odisha are changing in terms of modernization, education, and economic change, which is exposing them to traditional cultural practices. The fact that some folk dances were once practiced by religious communities as rituals and then turned into proscenium performances depicts how forms of culture change with shifting social situations [7]. Although these adaptations may allow more exposure and validation of traditional arts, issues such as the change of meaning and practice can be raised when the performances are moved out of community contexts and onto the professional stage. Tribal societies in Odisha are relatively flexible in their gender roles compared to patriarchal structures in the prevailing society (Bhattacharya 115). Although not strictly egalitarian, women are often given a visible role in economic life, ritual practices, and cultural performances in these communities. Dhemsa dance is the best example of such an inclusiveness, as in most performances women participate in dance along with men, and sometimes even in the foremost positions of the dance formations. Women's contribution to Dhemsa is not limited only to performance. Elder women play an important role in instructing the younger girls in the steps of the dance, the song, and the rituals associated with it. This informal method of cultural transmission provides a means of survival for indigenous traditions without written records. Through storytelling, demonstration, and collective practice, women are the custodians of the cultural memory.

Moreover, the use of Dhemsa offers tribal women a socially sanctioned space of expression. In the context where the formal political/institutional power may be limited, cultural practices such as dance become important means to assert a presence, identity, and collective voice. Participation in Dhemsa enables the women to feel a sense of belongingness and recognition in the community, which in turn reaffirms their significance socially.

Socio-Cultural Context

The fourth aspect is the social structures and economic conditions.

The involvement of Paroja and Gadaba women in Dhemsa dance is in a complex social-cultural setting that is characterized by specific social organization, economic status, and community organization. It is impossible to interpret the meaning of cultural practices among women and the limitations and opportunities they face without a thorough understanding of this context.

Even though tribal societies in Odisha are not totally isolated from caste influences, their social structure is in some crucial aspects divergent from that of caste-based Hindu society. The social structure of the

Gadaba tribe includes intricate ritualism, kin groups, and communal frames of governance, which determine daily life and other special events [5]. Another outstanding tribal group in Odisha is the Kondh tribes; it is said that their society lacked the relative gender discrimination, caste division, and dowry practices, with women playing a vital socio-cultural and economic role in the society [11]. However, we should not overstate this relative egalitarianism, as tribal women in Odisha confront significant economic and social challenges.

In Odisha, tribal women mostly practice agriculture and forest-based livelihoods, either as agricultural day laborers or as collectors and processors of minor forest produce [12]. Women often have no control over material and social resources, even though they make significant contributions to the economy, and often their income depends on male relatives mediating it [14]. The tribal women work within the forest or as contractors, and their income goes to their husbands, thus portraying the economic systems that are patriarchal and limit the freedom of women.

The economic conditions of tribal living in Koraput and western Odisha are marked by poverty, lack of infrastructure, and reliance on natural resources. These material circumstances determine the opportunities of cultural practices, such as the time and material means to practice dance and rituals. At the same time, cultural rituals like Dhemsa can provide essential social and psychological assets that can help communities deal with economic crises and maintain social integrity under difficult conditions.

Educational Attainment and Matrimonial Practices.

The access of tribal women to education in Odisha is still very low, which has enduring consequences for their life opportunities and social standing. Mothers and children often do not know about the opportunities in the field of education, which leads to extraordinarily low literacy rates among tribal women [14]. This illiteracy is a factor in early marriages, with tribal girls in some areas marrying as young as 14 and becoming mothers at the age of 15 with a short life span of about 40 years after that [14]. Such trends of low education levels and early marriages continue to perpetuate and entrench gender inequalities in the tribal society. Although there are signs of relatively egalitarian gender interactions within certain tribal societies of Odisha, there are also highly stratified gender relations, in which customary laws and purity-pollution philosophies disenfranchise women from the socioeconomic and religious sphere of activity [15]. An example provided by the Chuktia Bhunjia tribe illustrates how customary laws can be used to perpetuate patriarchal domination of women with respect to education, health, property, and decision-making [15]. The pattern of education and marriage that shapes the life opportunities of tribal women creates a context in which cultural practices like Dhemsa gain significant importance. Women's participation in dance and ritual can be one of the few places of collective expression, skill building, and social identity that women have in the absence of formal education and limited chances to engage in other areas of societal participation. Intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge by means of Dhemsa and other practices is a crucial element of informal education as it takes place outside formal schools.

Meanwhile, restrictions in education and autonomy of women constrain their ability to modify cultural practices to new situations or to promote the maintenance and acknowledgment of their practices in more general arenas. The blockade of education, early marriage, and economic dependence creates an environment of vulnerability that influences the way women experience and practice cultural practices.

Theoretical Framework

This is a study informed by three related theoretical perspectives: cultural anthropology, gender studies, and performance theory. From a cultural anthropological perspective, dance is seen as a social text that encodes values, beliefs, and power relationships. Dhemsa is not just a form of artistic activity but is a cultural institution that is reflective of tribal world views and social organization. Gender studies offer the analytical perspective to explore the position of women of Dhemsa in the context of the challenge to or perpetuation of the current gender order. Rather than perceiving tribal women as passive receivers of tradition, this framework stresses people's agency, creativity, and participation in creating cultural practices. Performance theory conceptualizes dancing as embodied knowledge. Through movement, rhythm, and collective participation, meaning is conveyed by the performers that may not be expressed in verbal words. Dhemsa, therefore, becomes a performative space where identity, ritual, and community are enacted by the body. By combining these perspectives, the study aims to provide a broad overview of Dhemsa dance as a gendered cultural practice that is deeply rooted in tribal life.

Research Methodology

The research design adopted in the study is a qualitative research design, which covers the experiential and symbolic aspects of the Dhemsa dance. Data were collected through:

Ethnographic observation of Dhemsa performances in festivals and community activities at the tribal villages of southern Odisha.

Semi-structured interviews of tribal women dancers, elderly women, and community members about their perceptions and experiences.

Secondary sources: such as academic books, journal articles, government reports, and ethnographic studies relating to tribal culture and dance traditions.

The qualitative approach enables an in-depth exploration of the meanings, practices, and narratives associated with women's participation in Dhemsa. The research process preserved ethical considerations like informed consent and cultural sensitivity.

Dhemsa Dance as a Means of Identity Formation

In tribal societies, people's identity is more built on collective practices than individual attributes. The Dhemsa dance is a key medium of tribal identity reinforcement, as it brings community members together throughout different ages and genders. For women, gendered and cultural identity are both served as expressive channels through participation in Dhemsa. Costumes used in Dhemsa—which usually involve traditional dresses, ornaments, and colors, which are used symbolically—are used to further reinforce markers of identity. Women's adornments signify marital status, age, and collective affiliation, creating a visual tableau of social stratification within the dance. At a deeper level, Dhemsa supports the process of embodying the cultural heritage among women. Repeated engagement results in the internalization of shared values and norms that in turn are passed down to succeeding generations. As a result, Dhemsa acts as a living cultural archive that has been preserved through embodied praxis and not through textual records.

Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer in the Indigenous

Tribal women play a significant role in the Dhemsa dance, serving as the carriers of indigenous knowledge. Senior women serve as mentors and teach the younger girls not only the dance movements but also the associated songs, myths, and rituals. Intergenerational transmission through Dhemsa guarantees the continuity of the culture and, at the same time, allows for adaptations. Younger women may offer subtle changes in style or rhythm reflecting changing social circumstances but remain true to the fundamental aspects of the tradition. Within a milieu where the processes of modernization, migration, and cultural homogenization have posed a threat to indigenous traditions, the role of women in preserving Dhemsa acquires a greater importance. Their efforts strengthen cultural identity amidst ongoing societal transformations.

Challenges and Transformations in Modern Times

Despite its significance in the culture, Dhemsa dance is facing many challenges in the 21st century. Exposure through cultural festivals or tourist events may have the benefit of increasing visibility and creating economic opportunities; however, it also carries the risk of marginalizing Dhemsa to a performative spectacle that could ruin its authenticity. On the other hand, these challenges provide the opportunity for cultural revitalization. Community-based initiatives, cultural documentation, and inclusive policy interventions can facilitate the relevance of Dhemsa and respect its indigenous underpinnings. The significance of women as key stakeholders in such efforts is vital to cultural preservation for the future.

Results and Discussion

The study illustrates the central role of tribal women in the performance, preservation, and transmission of Dhemsa dance. Their participation is instrumental in and gives shape to the ritual meaning, social function, and cultural continuity of the dance. Dhemsa forms a site of collective agency where women make their mark in the community. The dance strengthens family relationships and creates intergenerational communication and tribal identity while at the same time providing emotional expression, social recognition, and cultural empowerment for women.

By bringing women's roles into the foreground, the research acts against the mainstream narrative that marginalizes the contribution of indigenous women to cultural life, demonstrating that Dhemsa is not just a cultural artifact but a living practice sustained by the embodied knowledge and collective engagement of women.

Conclusion

The involvement of Paroja and Gadaba women in the Dhemsa dance is a major cultural practice that is realized at the interplay between the ritual, gender, and identity of tribal Odisha. This paper has discussed three dimensions of Dhemsa that are interrelated, namely: the ritual and cultural importance; the role of Dhemsa in determining gender activities and the formation of identities; and the wider socio-cultural context through which women live and perform their cultural activities.

Dhemsa, as a ritual practice, serves as an act of solidarity within the community, strengthening both social relationships and community unity through this communal, women-led performance. The dance is integrated into the traditional festivals and social events of the Paroja and Gadaba people, and it has an

entertainment and participatory role. Even though the ritual theology of Dhemsa in particular has not been sufficiently recorded in the academic literature, the ritual nonetheless has its place in a larger context of spiritual and symbolic activity that links practitioners to religious convictions, changing of the seasons, and transitions through the life cycles. The cross-generational engagement in Dhemsa—that is, the involvement of both the young and old women—suggests that it is a persistent activity that identifies and glorifies the social roles of the women all through their lives.

The way the gender roles and identity formation are constructed, Dhemsa creates a very gendered performance space within which the female gender plays the main, visible role of the cultural practitioner. This female-oriented performance space will offer the possibility of group expression, social acknowledgement, and the growth of cultural competence. Engaging in Dhemsa leads to the formation of a women's collective identity at various levels: individual emotional and social growth; collective socialization into community-based roles and mutual cultural definitions; and community-based expression of tribal identity. Through Dhemsa, transmission of culture between generations makes women highly significant players in reproduction and continuity of tribal culture. The meaning and significance of Dhemsa participation is defined by the socio-cultural context of tribal Odiani women's lives, i.e., economic difficulties, lack of access to education, early marriage rates, patriarchy, and speed of modernization. Cultural practices, like Dhemsa, are essential venues of communal expression, social presence, and cultural power through which women face limited opportunities in many areas of life. Simultaneously, the forces of modernization, the lack of continuous documentation, and institutional encouragement are some of the barriers to the maintenance and survival of community-based performance cultures.

We should acknowledge the numerous limitations of this study. The Dhemsa dance is not directly documented by ethnographers in the published literature, and thus general research on the Paroja and Gadaba communities and comparative studies of similar folk dancing traditions in Odisha must be used. Specifics of ritual meaning, performance guidelines, and subjective experience of Dhemsa attendance by women are not sufficiently documented in the available literature. Further studies are recommended to focus on intensive ethnography of Dhemsa practice (including participant observation and generational interviews with women dancers) and detailed recording of the performance situations and meanings. It is in spite of these shortcomings that this research study helps to comprehend how the traditional performance practices are used as loci of cultural continuity, social cohesion, and identity construction by the modern tribal societies. The Dhemsa dance is a good example of how such complex female cultural practices can be enacted in their own space and against the limits of their social environments to provide the space of collective agency and cultural expression and at the same time to be engaged in the reproduction of community identity and tradition.

To preserve and uphold Dhemsa and other cultural practices that are women-centered, it is necessary to focus on the practices and the socio-cultural contexts that facilitate or inhibit the practices. The need to have traditional arts documented and celebrated should be accompanied by measures that can counter the excesses of the educational, economic, and social problems of tribal women. Promoting the culture of women will then mean promoting women's agency, education, and decision-making concerning the cultural future of their communities.

Traditions like Dhemsa dance serve as valuable assets for Odisha tribes as they navigate the challenging balance between tradition and modernity, helping to preserve cultural identity, social bonds, and generational relationships. Further involvement of women in these activities and the culture of imparting knowledge to the younger generations will decide the cultural face of tribal Odisha in the next few

decades. To comprehend and endorse such practices, it will be necessary to understand women as the carriers of tradition but to also view women as participants in a continuous production and reproduction of cultural meaning and identity. This article has covered the status of tribal women in Dhemsa dance in Odisha and has established its importance as a ritualistic, social, and cultural practice. The research shows that Dhemsa goes beyond the concept of a communal dance; it is a medium through which tribal women express their identity and their tradition and maintain their communal life. Participation in Dhemsa is a manifestation of women's agency as the custodians of the culture and their active contribution to the indigenous knowledge systems. In this age of social change, it is important to recognize and foster their roles in order to maintain the richness of tribal heritage.

Future studies should take comparative regional perspectives or focus on the policy and globalization effects on tribal dances. Integrating women's voices and perspectives will continue to be vital to an understanding of the whole of tribal culture and identity.

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