

Threats to the Traditional Knowledge System
Case study the Habaspuri Saree of dist Kalahandi, Odisha

Dr.Pallishree Pattanayak, Sri Parameswar mund

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Abstract

Traditional knowledge systems, including ecological wisdom, cultural practices, medicinal knowledge, and spiritual values, are integral to the survival and identity of indigenous and local communities. However, these traditional systems face worthy attention as threats in the modern scientific technocratic world. Mostly Globalization, intellectual property challenges, environmental devastation, and the commodification of indigenous knowledge are demolishing these valuable frameworks. The marginalisation of traditional knowledge through biopiracy, political disenfranchisement, and environmental disruptions is particularly concerning, as it undermines the resilience of communities that have lived sustainably for generations. This article explores the multifaceted threats to traditional knowledge systems, discussing the implications of commercialization, legal inadequacies, and climate change. It also emphasizes the importance of protecting traditional knowledge through international agreements, policy reform, and legal recognition to ensure its survival and continued contribution to global sustainability. A case study has been done in the village Checheiguda of Dist. Kalahandi about the handloom saree Habaspuri which shows how the beautiful traditional weaving is dying and needs protection.

Keywords: Traditional knowledge systems, Indigenous knowledge, Globalization, Biopiracy, Intellectual property rights, Environmental degradation, Cultural appropriation, Climate change, Sustainable development, Biodiversity conservation, Handloom saree, Habaspuri, Kalahandi

This article explores the key threats to traditional knowledge systems, examining their causes, impacts, and potential strategies for safeguarding this invaluable heritage in the first part and a case study in the second part.

Part-one

Introduction

Traditional knowledge (TK) refers to the tradition-based practices, wisdom, and cultural heritage that indigenous and local communities have developed over centuries through their deep connection with nature and their social environments. This body of knowledge is passed down through generations, often orally or through practical engagement, and encompasses a broad spectrum of domains, including literature (folk literature), language, artistic or scientific works, cultural performances, tradition-based innovations medicine, agriculture, environmental management, and spirituality. Traditional knowledge is integral not only to the cultural identity and survival of these communities but also to global efforts in sustainable development, conservation, and biodiversity management.

‘Modernity ‘is not an evolved state as it was made out to be, but simply another form of culture. There is therefore, the realization that to handle a current global crisis, we have to go back to ‘the pre-modern vision of all non-western people ...that everything is connected and man is subject to fundamental religious and natural laws ‘(Jorge Armand.2000)

However, traditional knowledge systems around the world face a growing array of threats. From the encroachment forces of globalization and modernization, market culture, and consumerism to legal challenges and environmental degradation, these knowledge systems are under increasing pressure. The loss or suffusion of traditional knowledge has significant implications—not only for the communities that have preserved it for centuries but also for global sustainability efforts, as traditional knowledge often offers tremendous opportunities for solutions to modern ecological degradations, and many social problems including health management and medical problems.

The Value of Traditional Knowledge

Traditional knowledge is an indispensable resource for local and global sustainability. In the field of agriculture, for example, indigenous farming practices such as intercropping, agroforestry, and crop rotation have promoted biodiversity and sustainable land use for generations. In healthcare, traditional knowledge systems have developed an understanding of medicinal plants and treatments that have proven effective in modern scientific studies. In environmental management, traditional knowledge provides insights into the preservation of ecosystems, water conservation,

and wildlife management, often complementing modern scientific approaches. In making dress material and sarees the local handloom, handweaving has its aesthetic value.

Globally, traditional knowledge has gained increasing recognition in international policy forums, particularly in the context of climate change, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable development. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) underscore the need to protect and promote traditional knowledge. Despite these efforts, traditional knowledge remains vulnerable to a range of threats. Now it's time to focus on local knowledge systems in other areas like weaving.

1. Globalization and Modernization

Globalization is one of the most significant threats to traditional knowledge systems. The spread of Western ideologies, technologies, and lifestyles has eroded local traditions, cultures, and knowledge systems. As communities around the world become more integrated into the global economy, the values and practices of indigenous societies are increasingly marginalized and due to lack of preservation they are vanishing forever.

a) Cultural Homogenization

The global culture propagated through media, technology, and consumerism tends to promote a homogenized way of life that values modernity over tradition. This has led to the erosion of cultural identities in indigenous communities, particularly among younger generations. In many regions, Western education systems have replaced indigenous educational models, resulting in a decline in traditional knowledge transmission. Indigenous languages, which are vital to the preservation of traditional knowledge, are often neglected in favour of dominant global languages.

This cultural homogenization leads to the loss of diversity in knowledge systems, as local practices are replaced by standardized, industrialized methods of agriculture, healthcare, and environmental management. For example, traditional agricultural practices that prioritize biodiversity and sustainability may be abandoned in favour of industrial farming techniques that deplete the soil and require chemical inputs.

b) Urbanization and Migration

Globalization has driven many indigenous and rural communities to migrate to urban areas in search of economic opportunities. This migration disrupts the transmission of traditional knowledge, which is often rooted in specific ecosystems and environments. As people move away from their ancestral lands, they become disconnected from the local flora, fauna, and landscapes that have shaped their

knowledge systems. Additionally, urbanization can erode social structures that facilitate the transfer of traditional knowledge, such as communal gatherings and mentorship from elders.

2. Legal and Intellectual Property Challenges

The growing interest in traditional knowledge, particularly in sectors such as pharmaceuticals and agriculture, has resulted in legal and intellectual property challenges for indigenous communities. Traditional knowledge is increasingly being commodified and commercialized by multinational corporations, often without the consent or compensation of the communities from which the knowledge originated.

a) Biopiracy and Exploitation

Biopiracy, or the unauthorized appropriation of biological resources and traditional knowledge for commercial gain, is a significant threat to indigenous communities. In many cases, corporations have patented medicines, cosmetics, and agricultural products that are derived from traditional knowledge without acknowledging the contributions of indigenous peoples or sharing the benefits. This exploitation not only deprives indigenous communities of economic benefits but also discourages them from sharing their knowledge with outsiders for fear of exploitation. For example, pharmaceutical companies have often developed drugs from medicinal plants used by indigenous communities without their consent, leaving these communities without any share in the profits. This has led to a growing awareness of the need for stronger legal protections for traditional knowledge, but the implementation of such protections has been slow and inconsistent.

b) Inadequate Legal Protections

Despite international agreements like the Nagoya Protocol, which seeks to ensure the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the use of traditional knowledge, many countries lack robust legal frameworks to protect the intellectual property rights of indigenous communities. Intellectual property laws are often designed to protect individual inventors or corporations, making it difficult for collective forms of knowledge, such as those found in indigenous communities, to be protected. This lack of legal protection leaves traditional knowledge vulnerable to exploitation by external actors, including corporations, researchers, and even governments. Without the ability to assert ownership over their knowledge, Indigenous communities are often powerless to prevent others from profiting off their heritage.

3. Climate Change and Environmental Degradation

Climate change and environmental degradation present another major threat to traditional knowledge systems. Many indigenous communities are deeply

connected to their local ecosystems, relying on their understanding of the natural world for their livelihoods, culture, and knowledge systems. However, the rapidly changing climate and the destruction of natural environments are disrupting these knowledge systems.

a) Loss of Biodiversity

Traditional knowledge is often intimately connected to the biodiversity of a region. Indigenous communities have developed sophisticated systems of knowledge about the plants, animals, and ecosystems in their local environment. As biodiversity declines due to habitat destruction, pollution, and climate change, the knowledge associated with these species is also lost. For example, the extinction of certain plant species may result in the loss of traditional medicinal knowledge that has been passed down for generations.

The loss of biodiversity also threatens the cultural practices and spiritual beliefs that are intertwined with traditional knowledge. Many indigenous rituals and ceremonies are connected to specific animals, plants, or natural phenomena, and the loss of these elements disrupts the cultural fabric of these communities.

b) Disruption of Ecological Knowledge

Indigenous knowledge systems are often based on centuries of observation of natural cycles and patterns. However, climate change is altering these patterns, making it difficult for communities to rely on traditional ecological knowledge. For example, changes in weather patterns, such as unpredictable rainfall or shifting growing seasons, make it harder for farmers to plan their crops using traditional methods. Similarly, hunters and gatherers may struggle to predict the behaviour of animals as migration patterns and habitat ranges shift due to climate change.

Environmental degradation, such as deforestation, mining, and pollution, further exacerbates these challenges. As natural resources are depleted or contaminated, Indigenous communities lose access to the materials and landscapes that are central to their knowledge systems.

4. Commercialization and Cultural Appropriation

The commercialization of traditional knowledge poses a threat to its authenticity and cultural integrity. In many cases, traditional knowledge has been commodified by external actors for profit, often in ways that strip it of its original meaning and significance.

a) Cultural Appropriation

Cultural appropriation occurs when elements of indigenous cultures are adopted or exploited by outsiders without proper understanding, respect, or compensation. This can take many forms, from the commercialization of traditional

crafts and symbols to the commodification of spiritual practices and medicinal knowledge. For example, sacred symbols and rituals may be reproduced in mass-market products or tourism experiences, often in ways that distort or trivialize their meaning.

This form of exploitation not only undermines the cultural significance of traditional knowledge but also marginalizes the communities that have developed and maintained it. Indigenous peoples are often excluded from the economic benefits of this commercialization, while outsiders profit from their cultural heritage.

b) Devaluation of Traditional Practices

When traditional knowledge is commercialized, it is often simplified or transformed to fit market demands. This can result in the devaluation of traditional practices within the communities themselves. For instance, artisanal crafts that were once produced for ceremonial or communal purposes may be mass-produced and sold as tourist souvenirs, losing their cultural significance in the process. Similarly, traditional medicinal practices may be commercialized in ways that reduce their holistic, community-centred approach to healthcare.

5. Political Marginalization and Land Rights

Many indigenous communities face political marginalization, which undermines their ability to protect and preserve their traditional knowledge. Issues such as land dispossession, lack of political representation, and restricted access to natural resources are common challenges for indigenous peoples worldwide.

a) Land Dispossession and Resource Exploitation

Traditional knowledge is often rooted in the land, as indigenous communities rely on their environment for food, medicine, jobs and cultural practices. However, land dispossession through government policies, corporate land grabs, or environmental degradation disrupts the relationship between Indigenous peoples and their land. For example, large-scale deforestation or mining projects often displace indigenous communities from their ancestral lands, severing their connection to the natural resources that sustain their knowledge systems. Land rights are a central issue for the protection of traditional knowledge. Without secure land tenure, Indigenous communities cannot maintain their cultural practices, protect biodiversity, or pass down their knowledge to future generations. Moreover, the loss of land often leads to the loss of language, rituals, and ecological knowledge that are specific to particular landscapes.

b) Lack of Political Representation

Indigenous peoples are often disenfranchised politically and excluded from decision-making processes that affect their lands, resources, and traditional

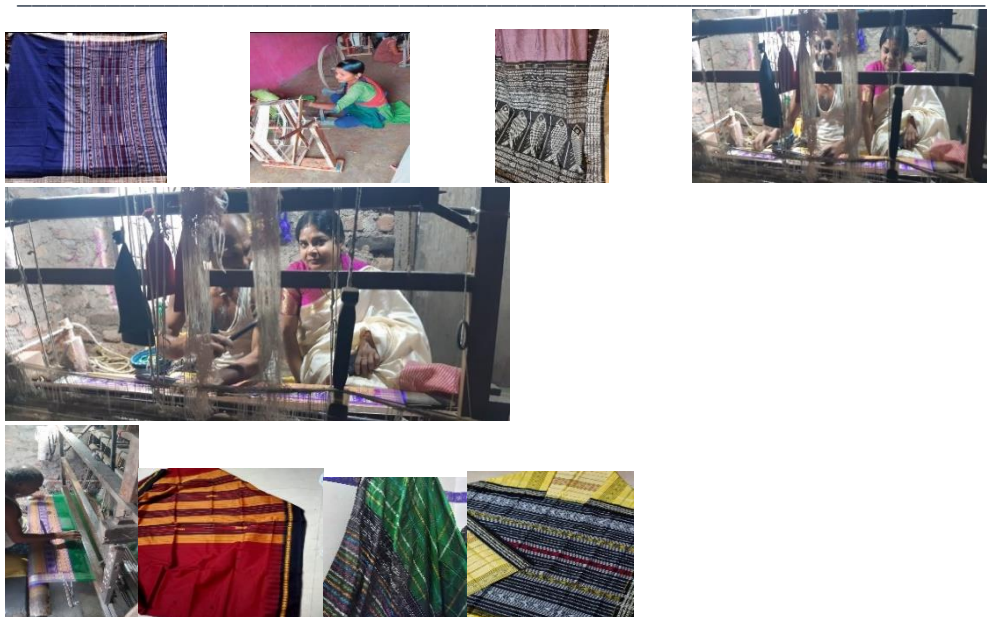
knowledge systems at large. In many countries, indigenous communities lack legal recognition or political representation, making it difficult for them to advocate for their rights or protect their knowledge. This political exclusion is exacerbated by systemic inequalities and historical injustices.

Case study : Habaspuri of Kalahandi ,Odisha :



At the time of the celebration of the first Independence Day in 1951 in Delhi, the Habaspuri Saree design was shown on the exhibition ground and it was highly praised by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru as told by Maharaja PratapKeshori Deo of Kalahandi.

Habaspuri Saree is the name of a handloom saree which is made by a traditional weaving system by the bhulia families of Habaspur, Checheiguda, and Ckakuli. Baldiamal villages of dist Kalahandi of Odisha. Though it's very much like the Sambalpuri pattern, it has its specialities too. Whereas we see the Bandha pattern in Sambalpuri, Sonpuri sarees remain at the end side here in this habaspuri saree this bandha pattern remains throughout the body of the saree. Another speciality is the work of Chhanda. In bandha the work of colour is important but in the work of chhanda the work of thread is important, There is a special skill for weaving this pattern. Where we see a single flower pattern in Sambalpuri we see here a double flower pattern. As Kalahandi is a tribal dominated area we can see the effect of tribal art here. The wall painting of tribals and the tattoos painted on their bodies are stitched in the saree which takes the aesthetic sense to a higher level.



Nowadays this traditional knowledge is under threat due to many reasons. Only one cooperative store is there which is insufficient. Traditional weavers are leaving their work and the young generation is not interested in learning it because of its low market consumption. There is no large-scale advertisement due to which this traditional beautiful art is in the dying stage.

Conclusion

The traditional knowledge systems of indigenous and local communities are invaluable for cultural identity, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable development. However, they face numerous threats from globalization, modernization, legal and intellectual property challenges, environmental degradation, and the commercialization of indigenous knowledge. These pressures not only endanger the survival of traditional practices but also undermine the resilience of communities that have lived in harmony with nature for generations.

Globalization and modernization have led to the erosion of cultural identities, migration, and the loss of indigenous languages and traditional practices. The legal and intellectual property challenges, particularly in the form of biopiracy and inadequate protections, further marginalize Indigenous communities and deprive them of their rightful claims to their knowledge and resources. Climate change and environmental degradation threaten to destroy the ecosystems upon which traditional knowledge is based, leading to the loss of biodiversity and disrupting indigenous ecological understanding.

Commercialization and cultural appropriation pose additional threats by stripping traditional knowledge of its cultural and spiritual significance. The commodification of sacred rituals, medicinal knowledge, and artisanal practices often devalues their importance within indigenous communities and leads to their distortion by external actors. Furthermore, political marginalization and land dispossession continue to weaken the connection between indigenous peoples and their lands, which are essential for the survival and transmission of traditional knowledge.

Efforts to protect traditional knowledge must be multifaceted. International agreements like the Convention on Biological Diversity's Nagoya Protocol and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) provide frameworks for safeguarding traditional knowledge, but implementation remains inconsistent. Additionally, legal reforms that protect the collective intellectual property rights of indigenous communities are necessary to prevent exploitation. Securing land rights and ensuring political representation for Indigenous communities is also critical for preserving traditional knowledge.

The future of traditional knowledge systems depends on the ability of governments, international organisations, and local communities to recognise their value and take proactive steps to protect them. As global environmental challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss become more pressing, traditional knowledge offers invaluable insights and solutions. Safeguarding these systems is not just about preserving the past, but about ensuring a sustainable and equitable future for all.

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