

Tribal Festivals and Dhimsa Dance of North Coastal Andhra: An Ethnographic Study in Araku Valley

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ABSTRACT : The tribal celebrations and Dhimsa dance customs of the Chompi and Chatraiputtu villages in the Araku Valley of North Coastal Andhra are examined ethnographically in this article. The study records the yearly festival cycle from Kurrakutha in August to Pitakhiya in May and investigates the function of Dhimsa dance within these celebrations. It is based on fieldwork that includes interviews with community leaders and observation of ritual activities. The results highlight the communal and interactive character of festivals, where social cohesiveness, performance, and ritual are deeply entwined. Festivals structure tribal time, regulate agricultural and hunting activities, and reinforce communal bonds, reflecting a worldview in which nature, deities, and human activity are inseparably linked. Dhimsa serves as a cultural bridge as well as a ritual performance, carried out in a variety of settings, from household celebrations like Pitakhiya that promote knowledge sharing and group expression to harvest celebrations during Sankranti and hunting rituals like Kandula and Itikela Pandaga. The study also emphasizes the significance of oral knowledge systems in maintaining ritual practices and ecological awareness, and it investigates the fluidity of deity identities, especially Sankhu Devudu. The indigenous communities of Araku exhibit continuity in the face of change by maintaining fundamental cultural values through adaptive ritual performance, even in the face of changes like the fall of Budiya and modifications in inter-community customs. The study advances our understanding of tribal festivals as dynamic systems of cultural identity, knowledge, and social ethics by placing Dhimsa within its lived festival setting.

KEYWORDS – Ethnography, Indigenous communities, Tribal festivals, Dhimsa dance, Araku Valley

I. INTRODUCTION

India is a nation rich in cultural diversity, with customs influenced by a range of social, ecological, and geographic factors. Festivals serve as reflectors of this diversity, reflecting local cultural values and providing a communal break from the grind of daily work (Chitrasen Pasayat). Festivals play an especially important role in indigenous societies, acting as archives of cultural memory and knowledge in addition to being occasions of celebration. Tribal cultures are cognizant of the rituals, beliefs, and cosmological concepts connected to their festivals and are firmly rooted in their meanings (Bhagvat). Tribes make sure that customs, values, and practices are passed down through the generations by celebrating festivals. Celebration is seen as a group activity, whether it is to commemorate great harvests, hunting accomplishments, or ceremonial milestones that promotes unity and

continuity. Festivals are held all year long throughout the Andhra Pradesh state's tribal areas, where dancing and songs are integral parts of the celebratory atmosphere. Instead of formal education, oral traditions and embodied participation are the main ways that artistic knowledge is passed along. Thus, tribal festivals serve as ritualized manifestations of social cohesiveness, spirituality, and identity. Village deities, also known as *grama devathas*, are metaphorical representations of natural forces like hills, forests, rain, and fertility and are an important part of daily devotion and festival observances (Naidu). The ceremonial customs to these *grama devathas* are crucial for maintaining indigenous belief systems and tribal identity for the tribes.

One of South India's most culturally dynamic tribal areas is North Coastal Andhra, which is home to numerous indigenous populations whose social lives are intricately entwined with rituals, seasonal celebrations, and performative customs. Tribal groups like the *Bagatha*, *Valmiki*, *Kondadora*, *Khond*, *Porja*, and *Kotia* populations live in the Araku Valley in the Eastern Ghats (Karri et al.). Because of its complex ceremonial calendar and the ongoing practice of collective dance traditions like *Dhimsa* (Naidu), the *Bagatha* community has a prominent position among them. Systematic anthropological documenting of these cultural expressions' internal meanings, social roles, and ritual contexts is still lacking, even though they are often highlighted in popular and touristy portrayals. Close familial links, the guidance of elders, and the ongoing observance of festivals and artistic traditions guarantee the survival of tribal cultural life despite the obvious consequences of modernization.

Tribal festivals are strongly related to seasonal cycles, subsistence activities, communal worship, and social organization rather than being discrete celebration events (Krishna Murthy). They mark changes related to agriculture, forest products, communal well-being, and spiritual observance, structuring the yearly rhythm of existence. According to this concept, performance practices particularly dance and music are not distinct artistic forms but rather an essential part of ritual life. A sense of fulfillment and community is created when joy is expressed via rhythmic movement and sound. The persistence of Indian tribal knowledge systems, which are maintained by communal involvement and lived practice, is reflected in the continuance of these performance traditions.

Dhimsa, a communal tribal dance in the Araku Valley and its indigenous populations of North Coastal Andhra Pradesh, is one example of this kind of cultural expression. *Dhimsa* is performed on all occasions and festivals, except for death-related rites (Krishna Murthy). It serves as a ubiquitous performative expression of communal life, accompanying agricultural, ritual, hunting, household, and festive occasions. *Dhimsa*'s relationship with life-affirming cycles, fertility, communal delight, and social continuity is further highlighted by its absence in burial situations, which reinforces its alignment with celebration rather than mourning (Mohana Rao).

Dhimsa is a well-known collective dance that is performed at festivals, marriages, and community get-togethers. It holds a significant position in the Araku region's cultural landscape (Ramisetty and Dyavanapalli). The participation spirit of tribal social life is reflected in *Dhimsa*, which is characterized by circular forms, rhythmic gestures, and live instrumental accompaniment. However, the literature that is currently available typically separates *Dhimsa* from its ceremonial and festival contexts, portraying it largely as a folk or tribal dance that represents regional identity. Instead of acknowledging dance as a lived cultural activity ingrained in regular social and ritual life, such portrayals run the risk of turning it to a theatrical spectacle. By placing *Dhimsa* within the Araku Valley's yearly festival cycle, the current study fills this gap. The study investigates how *Dhimsa* serves as a crucial aspect of tribal celebrations, promoting social cohesion, group engagement, and the strengthening of cultural identity, as opposed to studying the dance in isolation. The research provides a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between ritual, performance, and communal life by recording the festivals witnessed throughout the year and analyzing the settings in which *Dhimsa* is performed.

This essay is based on ethnographic fieldwork in the villages of Chompi and Chatraiputtu, which included semi-structured interviews with reputable *Dhimsa* practitioners and community leaders, *Gujjala Krishna Murthy* of Chompi and *Gomangi Mohana Rao* of Chatraiputtu villages. Both informants are members of the *Bagatha* community and have strong cultural transmission traditions. While Mohana Rao's grandmother, *Smt. Killi Janakamma*, was a well-known *Dhimsa* dancer who performed all over the country, including in New Delhi during Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's administration, Krishna Murthy's father, *Gujjala Madhu Naidu*, was a former village chief and leader of a *Dhimsa* troupe. These interviews had shed light on *Dhimsa*'s past, the festival cycle's

organization, and the cultural significance of performances. The information allows for a contextual understanding of *Bagatha* ritual life, supplemented by observation and previous research.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Ethnographic documentation has long served as the foundation for scholarly engagement with tribal tribes and their cultural practices in India. Though mostly through colonial classificatory lenses, early studies like Thurston's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (1909) and Baines' *Ethnography (Castes and Tribes)* (1912) established fundamental frameworks for comprehending tribal social organization, belief systems, and traditional practices. These studies are nonetheless useful archive resources for tracking the historical documentation of tribal life and ceremonial expression, despite their methodological dating. More sophisticated methods that emphasized indigenous viewpoints were used in later ethnographic research. In this regard, Léer-Haimendorf's *Tribes of India: The Struggle for Survival* (1989) highlights the resilience of cultural practices, especially ritual, music, and dance as markers of identity and continuity, while critically examining the effects of modernization, displacement, and state intervention on tribal societies.

This conversation has been further developed by region-specific ethnographies, especially in Andhra Pradesh. In-depth descriptions of social organization, ceremonial life, festivals, music, and dance customs rooted in agricultural cycles, ancestor worship, and regional deity cults can be found in J. M. Naidu's comprehensive research on the *Bagatha* and Konda Kapu tribes (2020). Naidu's work is important for placing performance practices in the context of larger socioeconomic shifts, such as the impacts of education, welfare policies, and changes in livelihoods. These studies show that dance and performance serve as essential elements of cultural transmission, communal memory, and community cohesion in addition to being aesthetic forms.

The communal aspects of folk and tribal dancing are further revealed by theoretical and descriptive studies. According to Kapila Vatsyayan (1977), Indian folk dance emphasizes the connections between folk, tribal, and classical forms and is a collective, ritual-based practice that preserves mythic awareness, oral history, and regional aesthetics. In a similar vein, Jiwan Pani (2000) places folk dances in the context of daily existence, ritual observance, and communal celebration. Gautier's summary of folk and social dances emphasizes how they promote embodied community life and shared cultural experiences. A gap between documentation and contextual interpretation is revealed by regionally focused studies like Spreen's documentation of South Indian folk dances and Walia's work on Punjabi folk dances, which offer useful descriptive material on movement and musical structures but mostly avoid deeper theoretical analysis. In the literature, festivals are portrayed as essential cultural institutions where social life, performance, and ritual come together.

Tribal festivals are positioned within agricultural calendars, nature worship, and indigenous religious systems by Satprakashananda (1956) and Bhagvat (1968), emphasizing their function in fostering social solidarity and ecological consciousness. By viewing festivals as dynamic, ever-evolving phenomena that continue to function as venues for identity formation and cultural continuity, Cudny (2014) broadens this understanding. While Mondal and Pandey (2024) highlight indigenous festivals as venues for disseminating ecological knowledge and climate sustainability practices, Pandey (2021) investigates festivals as performative declarations of territorial and political identity. Together, these studies demonstrate that tribal celebrations and dances are intricate, embodied behaviors situated at the nexus of ritual, ecology, identity, and socio-political negotiation rather as discrete cultural items. However, there is still a large deficit in targeted, performance-centered studies of *Dhimsa* dance despite a wealth of anthropological and folkloristic research. Most of the literature now in publication portrays *Dhimsa* as a folk performance that is exhibited in public and tourist settings, paying little attention to how deeply ingrained it is in the *Bagatha* community's yearly ceremonial calendar and daily religious life. As a result, *Dhimsa* is frequently isolated from the ritual and socio-ecological frameworks that support its continuity and significance. By placing *Dhimsa* within its experienced festival contexts, this study aims to close this gap by providing an integrated knowledge of dance, ritual, and communal life in the Araku area.

III. METHODOLOGY

To record and analyze the tribal festivals and *Dhimsa* dance customs of the Chompi and Chatraiputtu villages in North Coastal Andhra Pradesh, the current study uses a qualitative ethnographic methodology. Because it enables

a thorough understanding of cultural activities as they are experienced, narrated, and performed within the community context, ethnography is especially well-suited to this subject. These villages offer a representative environment for researching how indigenous cultures' religious practices, festivals, and performative traditions interact. The research aims to show festivals and dance activities within its indigenous cultural logic rather than trying to impose external analytical frameworks. Contextual interpretation, which places the recorded behaviors within the larger social, ritual, and ecological settings of the *Bagatha* society, complements this descriptive approach. A comprehensive knowledge of *Dhimsa* dance as an essential part of festival life and community identity, rather than just as a performance form, is made possible by this method. The entire study process was conducted with ethical concern. Prior to the interview, the interviewee gave their informed consent after being fully informed of the study's objectives. Since a large portion of cultural knowledge is passed down through lived experience and oral narration rather than written records, the study upheld the values of respect for oral traditions and communal knowledge. To avoid exploitative or misrepresentative interpretations of cultural traditions, care was taken to accurately depict the community's viewpoints.

IV. ANNUAL RITUAL FESTIVALS OF ARAKU VALLEY VILLAGES

Indigenous stories state that the Araku celebrate about ten to twelve festivals a year, each of which corresponds with seasonal changes, subsistence activities, and ceremonial duties. The agricultural cycle, forest products, and communal devotion are all strongly associated with these celebrations. The tribal celebrations of North Coastal Andhra can be broadly divided into three interconnected categories based on field interviews and a review of the literature.

- **Seasonal and agrarian festivities** that are connected to planting, harvesting, and gathering forest resources. The community's bond with the land and ecological cycles is strengthened by the *Dhimsa* dance, which is performed on certain occasions as a collective expression of appreciation, continuity, and shared labor.
- **Social and community festivals** focus on social milestones including marriage-related festivities and get-togethers. *Dhimsa* is a participatory cultural practice that unites various age and gender groups in these settings, strengthening social ties and fostering community cohesiveness.
- The worship of ancestral spirits and local deities is the focus of **Ritual and Spiritual observances**. Here, *Dhimsa* takes on a ceremonial quality, representing spiritual convictions and helping to pass along ancestral customs and collective memory to future generations.

V. TRIBAL FESTIVALS AND DHIMSA DANCE

The Araku Valley's tribal communities, especially the *Bagatha* and related hill tribes, celebrate the *Kurrakūtha* festival every year in the month of August. *Kurrakūtha* serves as a communal invocation for fertility of the land, prosperity of the village, and protection from natural and spiritual obstacles. It is closely linked to agricultural cycles and collective well-being. The celebration, which has its roots in indigenous belief systems, combines village-centric ritual practice, veneration for ancestors, and adoration of nature. *Kurrakūtha* is celebrated every year in August, when the first monsoon rains begin, and is considered the first festival of the ceremonial year, according to community histories. The first seeds are sowed, signifying the start of the agricultural cycle. *Kurrakūtha* therefore ushers in the yearly series of celebrations and creates a ceremonial structure that promotes fertility, plenty, and communal well-being. Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend *Kurrakūtha* to view *Dhimsa* as a vital part of indigenous festival life and cultural continuity in the Araku Valley, rather than just as a tribal dance form.

The *Jāthara* festival, which takes place in September, is the next event in the ritual calendar. *Jāthara* is devoted to the community's major deity, *Pedda Devudu*, also known locally as *Pothu Raju*, and has great religious significance. According to oral traditions, *Pedda Devudu* is thought to live atop *Morri Konda*, a holy hill that serves as an essential ritual site for the *Bagatha* people. The hill is seen as a live sacred presence that represents divine protection, ancestral authority, and moral order rather than just a topographical element. Thus, *Jāthara*

affirms the close bond between people, land, and deity. Village men climb *Morri Konda* as part of the custom to retrieve water from holy wells and transport it back to their communities. The water-filled jars, called *bindelu*, are placed close to the local deity *Sanku Devudu* as part of a communal celebration. The water that will be used in the first stage of cultivation is symbolically consecrated by performing *Dhimsa* around these pots. Mohana Rao claims that *Pothu Raju*'s presence on the hilltop is said to enable the god to supervise village life and keep it safe. Such gods connected to hills and forests are frequently worshipped through recurring festivals that incorporate ritual, sacrifice, song, and group participation, according to academics studying tribal religion. *Jāthara*'s date right after *Kurraukūtha* further places it within a continuity of agrarian ritual activities, supporting a worldview that emphasizes the close connections between societal harmony, agricultural productivity, and divine favor.

Dasara, which takes place in October, is the next big celebration. It includes a lot of ritual offerings and animal sacrifice, just like other *Dasara* festivities. *Gangamma Thalli*, a strong village goddess connected to fertility, safety, and agricultural prosperity, is the ruling deity. Every household provides a goat sacrifice during *Dasara*, highlighting the communal aspect of worship and shared ritual responsibilities. By October, the sowing process is over, and *Dasara*, a ceremonial act of gratitude and a request for protection throughout the crop's development period, marks a turning point in the agricultural calendar. According to Mohana Rao, *Pothu Raju* is thought of as *Gangamma Thalli*'s brother, and she is considered the community's primary deity. An important component of indigenous cosmology is this sibling bond. Geographically, *Pothu Raju*, who represents guardianship, is situated at the village's edge, while *Gangamma Thalli*, who represents protection and sustenance, lives in the village's center.

The Araku region's tribal communities observe *Dīpāvali* in various ways, which reflects historical change and cultural diversity. According to field interviews, the festival is celebrated differently by the *Bagatha*, Valmiki, and *Kondadora* populations. *Dīpāvali* has historically been considered the most important festival by the Valmiki community, while the *Bagatha* retain their traditional celebrations. Krishna Murthy of Chompi village claims that the previous nine-day celebrations were characterized by *nāṭakam* (folk/tribal theater) performances that took place all night long with traditional musical accompaniment. A goat or calf and five *kunchas* of rice (an indigenous measurement) were given by the Naidu, the leader of the *Bagatha* village, to the Valmiki entertainers during this time, allowing for a communal celebration. Performance, patronage, and subsistence were all entwined in this ritual exchange, which is an example of intercommunity collaboration. Folk performances reinforced social ties and cultural continuity by serving as ritual acts rather than forms of amusement. Krishna Murthy points out that the Valmiki community has recently stopped celebrating *Dīpāvali* because they have converted to Christianity. Consequently, a festival that was formerly observed for nine days is no longer observed at all, signifying larger processes of cultural change and the disappearance of related performative practices. The disparate effects of these modifications underscore the need for community-specific ethnographic documentation as opposed to standardized interpretations of tribal festivities.

Sankrānti, also known as the harvest festival, is the next big celebration. *Sankrānti* has profound ethical, performative, and historical relevance. Krishna Murthy places the celebration in the context of the *Bagatha* community's historical ties to the *Maharajas* of Jeypore (Odisha) and Vizianagaram. In the past, *Bagatha* men would deliver harvested crops to the *Maharaja* (King) with the help of nearby villages, offering a share as tax. *Dhimsa* was danced around the harvested product, symbolizing gratitude and prosperity, as this act was happily performed with musical accompaniment. According to oral tradition, *Dhimsa* originated from this practice, which grounds the dance in communal joy and agrarian identity. Mohana Rao highlights the ethical aspect of *Sankrānti* in village life. During the festival, those with abundant crops shared produce with those facing scarcity, serving as a moment of collective assessment. This redistribution strengthened social cohesiveness and mutual responsibility because it was perceived as a collective duty rather than a charitable act. *Sankrānti* challenges depictions of *Dhimsa* as a disconnected folk performance by combining history, performance, economy, and ethics into a coherent ritual framework.

Budiya, also called *Dharma Sankrānti*, was originally commemorated for three days as part of the ritual calendar after *Sankrānti*. In *Budiya*, groups conducted a unique, male-only *Dhimsa* while going from home to house to collect dharma, or alms. This was seen as ceremonial reciprocity that allowed involvement in the community's moral economy rather than begging. Performers utilized little symbolic swords, painted their bodies in various colours, and wore very little clothing. They also wore a single *gochi*, which is a loin cloth that covers their privates. According to the interviewees, ritual discipline and communal memory are eroding because *Budiya* is no longer performed and the *mutadāru* (team leader) role has vanished. *Budiya*'s decline reflects broader cultural changes and evolving attitudes about ritual practice. Following *Budiya*, the community celebrates *Nandi Pandaga*, which is associated with the harvest of *Konda Cheepuru*, a plant utilized in everyday and ceremonial life, particularly for dry wiping Indian homes' floors. According to oral traditions, harvesting cannot take place without celebrating the holiday. Beliefs in divine or natural sanction are reinforced by a widely told narrative about peasants who disobeyed this ritual rule and were attacked by a bear in the forest. Usually, *Nandi Pandaga* is observed in February.

Kandula Pandaga, a prelude to hunting, comes next in March. The perfume of *kandulu*, a type of green lentil, is fried in households and is thought to draw animals. Following their hunt, the locals integrate ritual, performance, and subsistence by performing *Dhimsa* around the trapped animals. *Itikela Pandaga*, a twelve-day celebration of the advent of mangoes in April, follows right after. Men use traditional weapons known as "iting" to hunt every day during this time, and *Dhimsa* is performed around the catch every night. These celebrations show how closely seasonal cycles, eating customs, hunting, and dance are all integrated.

Pitakhiya, also called *Liyakhiya* or *Mandrukhiya*, is the last event, and it takes place in May. Sweets made from leftover materials from the yearly cycle are served alongside *Dhimsa* performances during this celebration. *Pitakhiya* closes the rite and gets the society ready for the following cycle, which starts with *Kurrakūtha*. *Dhimsa* serves as an ongoing performative thread throughout this yearly festival cycle, enacted on every occasion except death. It connects social cohesion, gendered engagement, ceremonial obligation, agricultural activity, and ecological consciousness. Festivals are not isolated events but interconnected nodes of ritual regulation, ecological knowledge, and communal ethics, demonstrating the inseparability of dance, myth, and lived social practice in the cultural life of the Araku Valley.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Araku villages' yearly festival cycle serves as a social and temporal framework that organizes daily life. Festivals that correspond with agricultural, ecological, and seasonal cycles, from *Kurrakūtha* in August to *Pitakhiya* in May, commemorate stages including planting, harvesting, hunting, and redistributing resources. These festivities establish a common temporal awareness that governs work, social responsibilities, and interpersonal relationships. Festivals also function as methods of resource management and community accountability by connecting ritual observance to ecological cycles, guaranteeing the synchronization of social, ecological, and economic life. *Dhimsa* appears as the main performative element that unites hunting customs, agricultural cycles, and group festivities throughout the festival calendar. The study also shows how social, religious, and economic shifts have affected the Araku community's ceremonial and performance traditions. Certain inter-community ritual practices have been disrupted, festivals like *Budiya* and multi-day *Dīpāvali* have decreased, and leadership positions like the *mutadāru* (team leader who is also the village headman) are vanishing. However, the fundamental ideas of ritualized performance, ecological atonement, and social solidarity are still in place. This dynamic demonstrates how tribal cultures manage continuity in the face of change, maintaining fundamental cultural logics while modifying ceremonial forms to fit modern circumstances. In addition to providing insights into how festivals and performances maintain cultural continuity in the face of change, this study emphasizes the significance of recording tribal ritual systems as live, dynamic manifestations of identity, ethics, and ecological concern.

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