

# Promoting Intangible Heritage for Peace and Identity in Conflict Zones: A Case Study of Bastar, Chhattisgarh, India

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## **Abstract:**

**Purpose-** The paper explores the important role of intangible heritage in promoting peace and identity in conflict zones. It aims to present an alternative approach to conflict reduction by focusing on the importance of cultural traditions and their global recognition in these regions.

**Design/Methodology/Approach-** The research focuses on the development of new opportunities for promoting intangible cultural practises and traditions in conflict zones. After analysing Chhattisgarh history, Bastar culture and customs from previous generations, and regional conflicts by studying various government resources, forums, and conversations with regional journalists.

**Findings-** The outcomes of the research show that recognising intangible heritage not only protects cultural diversity but also empowers individuals, contributing to a broad recognition and thorough understanding of conflict zones. It focuses attention to how important intangible heritage can be in creating peaceful coexistence.

**Originality-** This research is unique because it replaces the traditional emphasis on tangible property with a focus on intangible cultural practises and traditions. This change encourages social and personal strength, as well as cultural identity away from conflict, while also protecting cultural diversity, leading to a deeper understanding for the many traditions and cultures.

**Keywords:** Intangible heritage, Conflict zones, Peace promotion, Global acknowledgment, Heritage and culture, Empowerment.

## **Introduction:**

This research paper advocates for a shift in focus towards documenting and preserving intangible heritage and cultural practices within conflict zones, with a specific case study of Bastar, India. By conducting surveys and engaging with local communities, we can empower individuals to take ownership of and pride in their cultural heritage. Promoting this intangible heritage among regional communities as their ancestral tradition and property encourages a sense of identity that transcends the label of a conflict zone.

Engaging local communities in the preservation and promotion of their intangible heritage serves as a countermeasure against the influence of extremist organizations. Recognising and valuing cultural

traditions incentivizes individuals to seek peaceful avenues for expressing their identity, reducing their inclination to join extremist groups involved in conflicts against the government.

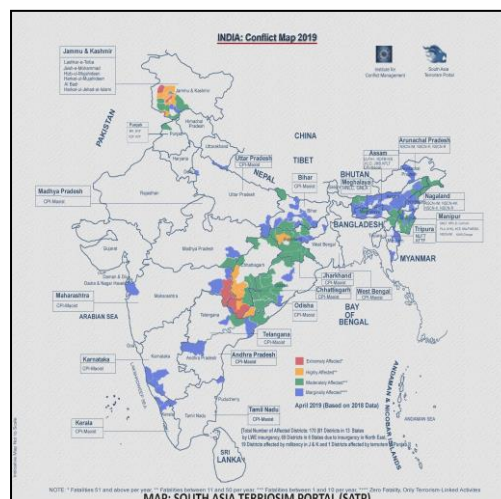
Furthermore, this approach strengthens local involvement in safeguarding their heritage and fosters peace and stability within conflict zones. By providing a global identity to intangible heritage and empowering local communities, this research paper argues that conflicts can be diminished. Both extremist groups and governments struggle to interfere without the support of regional communities. Recognising cultural traditions as valuable heritage enhances social cohesion and enables conflict-affected regions to regain their sense of identity and pride.

Conflict zones, characterised by violence, instability, and loss, present one of the most challenging and urgent concerns of our time. These areas, often marked by armed conflicts, insurgency, bring with them not only the tangible costs of human lives and infrastructure but also a less visible yet deeply significant casualty: the preservation of cultural heritage. In India, a country with rich and diverse cultural traditions, this issue is especially acute in three conflict-torn regions: Jammu and Kashmir, the North East, and Central and Eastern India.

**Kashmir Conflict:** Kashmir's political plurality frequently favoured militants and separatists, which led to a string of insurgencies since 1988. While their own organizations are reportedly supported and encouraged by Pakistani terrorist and militant groups, these separatists view Kashmir as an independent state with no connection to either India or Pakistan.

**North East Conflict:** Ethnic and tribal separatist movements in states like Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland seek greater autonomy or full independence from India to protect their culture, land, and communities from exploitation.

### Left Wing Extremist (LWE) Zone:



The LWE/RED zone, inspired by Maoist ideology, aim to establish a government of the rebels. However, their actions are nowhere near to the nobility which they promise to shepherd in the society. They are highly involved in criminal and heinous activities like preferring guerrilla warfare and attacking the security forces, resulting in death to many para-military and police personnels. They intend to justify these killings in the name of their advocacy for rights of marginalized communities and landless farmers. These areas, where the deployment of central security forces alongside local police is a

common sight, have seen their cultural heritage imperilled by the exigencies of maintaining peace and order.

Conflict zones, broadly defined, are territories grappling with acute unrest, often resulting from ethnic, political, or ideological disparities. The deployment of central forces shows the government's commitment to maintaining order and stability in these areas. However, the requirements of conflict management in these regions may unknowingly contribute to the disadvantage of cultural property, both tangible and intangible.

Jammu & Kashmir, located in India's far north, has been engaged in a decades-long conflict that has resulted in significant human loss and the destruction of historical landmarks. The armed forces presence in this region has had an impact on the preservation of its rich legacy, including music, art, and centuries-old traditions.

The North East, a group of states and localities, has witnessed a number of insurgencies. The region's cultural richness and traditions, which include a treasure trove of indigenous knowledge systems, folk art, and unique customs, have been impacted as a result of the deployment of security personnel.

Chhattisgarh, in central India, has long been affected by Naxalite insurgencies. The presence of central troops to combat extremism has unknowingly ignored the preservation of the state's distinct legacy, notably the intangible elements of tribal rites, customs, and traditional knowledge.

While tangible heritage, such as historical buildings and artefacts, receives a lot of attention, intangible heritage, which includes customs, rituals, traditional knowledge, and social practises, is often neglected. This neglect misses the importance of these elements in defining a community's identity and preserving cultural diversity.

This research paper aims to shed light on the function of intangible heritage in conflict zones, with a specific focus on Chhattisgarh, and presents a fresh approach to conflict reduction by recognising the value of cultural traditions and their broad acceptance. It argues that protecting and promoting intangible heritage is not only culturally significant, but also an essential component of peace-building efforts in these conflict zones. It is a request for more on establishing a tradition as an asset for peace, identity, and a common human experience. We can empower these places to find peace and pride in their identity by including regional communities, acknowledging their traditions, and promoting them into the global cultural fabric.

Intangible heritage often becomes a casualty of conflict as attention gravitates towards physical assets. The preservation of intangible heritage not only safeguards cultural diversity but also empowers communities, fostering social cohesion and facilitating peacebuilding efforts. This paper centres on the Chhattisgarh region, particularly Bastar, a hotspot of naxalism and terror, to illustrate how intangible heritage can be used to instill peace and identity in conflict zones.

### **The study contains information about intangible heritage, namely two key intangible heritages from Bastar:**

**(1) Bastar Dussehra Festival:** The Bastar Dussehra is a remarkable 75-day long festival and is often touted as one of the longest festivals in the world. The festival's significance in Bastar's cultural heritage is unparalleled. Preparation of this unique celebration involves capturing the intricate process of preparing the rath (chariot) by hand, the traditional rituals that have been passed down through generations, and the pujas conducted with great detail. This paper includes images as well as information histories from local participants, giving light on the festival's rich history and cultural relevance.

**Introduction:**

Bastar Dussehra, often known as the longest festival, is an unique and colourful event significantly rooted in the traditions of Chhattisgarh's Bastar area. This amazing 75-day festival offers an exciting mixture of traditional customs, tribal culture, and a strong connection to the local deity, Goddess Danteshwari Devi. This paper will present the Bastar Dussehra festival, highlighting its historical significance, preparation, and the events that take place over a long period of time.

**Historical Origins:**

Bastar Dussehra dates back to the 13th century, during the reign of King Purshottam Dev, the 4th King of Bastar. Unlike the traditional Dussehra celebration, which remembers Lord Rama's victory over Ravana, this festival honours the local divinity, Goddess Danteshwari Devi. It portrays a unique combination of tribal tribes that also worship their gods and goddesses, who are inspired by nature in all of its forms.

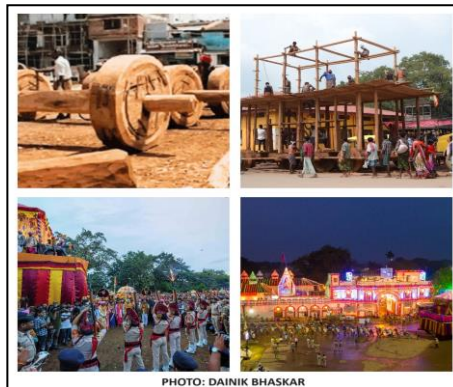
**Preparations:**

PHOTO: DAINIK BHASKAR

The preparation for Bastar Dussehra begins during the dark fortnight or waning moon (Krishna Paksh) in the Hindu month of Shraavan, typically falling at the end of July. The festivities continue up to the 13th day of the waxing moon (Shukla Paksh) in the month of Ashwin (between August and October). A distinctive aspect of this festival is that it is organised by the Raj family of Bastar, setting it apart from many other festivals organised by government departments or private entities.

**The Festival Unveiled:**

The streets of Jagdalpur, the epicentre of the festival, burst with energy and excitement as people don vibrant traditional attire and engage in dancing and drumming. The festival's centrepiece is a massive two-tiered chariot, meticulously crafted by skilled carpenters and beautifully adorned. The chariot is then pulled through the streets by as many as 400 people, showcasing the incredible devotion and collective spirit of the community.

The festival's final ten days are an a spectacle, with a wide range of tribal traditions concluding in the Pushp Rath Parikrama and Bheetar Raini ceremonies. The festival maintains its tribal customs while being unaffected by modern influences, creating a totally unique and authentic experience.

**Why Celebrate Bastar Dussehra:**

In a period when many festivals are including urban elements, Bastar Dussehra is a tribute to the preservation of tribal traditions and authenticity. Being a part of this old and colourful festival provides a unique experience of happiness and calm.

**(2) Tribal Tradition of Goddess Judgment:** The research paper also includes information about the unique tribal tradition in which the goddess sits in judgement on tribe gods. This custom, which takes

place during the 'Bhado Jatra' festival, is an important component of Bastar's cultural fabric. This ritual shows how the tribal tribe transports their family devtas for trial and judgement, as well as the announcement of Bhangaram Devi's verdict and the penalties for the 'punished' gods. The totems, which are frequently left leaning against trees in the temple's backyard, have a special cultural significance.

### **Introduction:**

The tribal communities of Bastar, located in the Chhattisgarh region of India, have preserved a captivating and deeply rooted tradition known as the "Tribal Tradition of Goddess Judgment." This extraordinary intangible tradition highlights these tribes' devoted beliefs and provides a unique glance into their traditional practises. This research seeks to throw light on this remarkable tradition in which tribal deities are tried and sentenced for failing to satisfy the needs of devotees or easing their suffering.

### **Historical Origins:**

The tradition of Goddess Judgment has been practised for generations and represents an important part of Bastar's cultural fabric. It is a ritual in which tribal deities are presented to Goddess Bhangaram Devi for judgement. This custom may be traced back to the apex of Keshkal Valley in Bastar and has been carried down through centuries.

### **The Ritual:**



PHOTO: TIMES OF INDIA/RASHMI DROLIA

Tribals from over 240 villages in the region gather at the court of Goddess Bhangaram Devi for the annual 'Bhado Jatra' festival. Each participant brings their family deity, known as 'devtas,' to the temple to file complaints against them. The priest, serving as a middleman, conveys Goddess Bhangaram Devi's judgement. If a deity is found to have failed in its responsibilities, it is "punished" by sending out to the temple's backyard.

### **The Banishment Yard:**

The back side of the temple is a unique and amazing location where the banished deities are kept. Totems of various shapes and sizes, such as 'dolis, boxes, drums, stretchers, and others, are hidden in the deep greenery or leaning against trees. These totems can be carved from stone, wood, or sculpted clay, and their skill ranges from magnificent to simple. The banishment yard attests to the tribal concept that Goddess Bhangaram Devi's judgement is final, and furthermore, those deities who are "punished" lose their divinity.

### **Folk Beliefs:**

The tribals of Bastar believe that Goddess Bhangaram Devi's judgement is the final law. If their deities are "punished," it signifies a diminishment of their divinity, and these deities are essentially abandoned in the temple's backyard. This ancient tradition is handed down through generations, with priest brothers playing a pivotal role in maintaining and upholding the ritual.

**Notable Aspects:**

- Apart from the banishment yard, a special corner is reserved for 'devtas' who failed to protect villagers from black magic. This corner, located under a tree next to an image of Goddess Kali, symbolises the intersection of Hindu religion and tribal spirituality.
- Interestingly, women are not allowed at the 'Bhado Jatra' festival, even though tribal tradition typically grants women equal status in all other aspects of life.
- The temple, dedicated to Goddess Bhangaram Devi, was established between the 17th and 18th centuries during the reign of King Bhairamdev.
- By adding these two extraordinary intangible heritages into the research methodology, the paper not only preserves but also brings these cultural traditions to wider audiences, highlighting the rich heritage of Bastar and its importance in the broader context of conflict zones, identity, and peace.

**Methodology:**

This research paper uses an integrated methodology to investigate the protection and promotion of intangible heritage in conflict zones, with a specific focus on Chhattisgarh, India. The methodology aims to capture all aspects of intangible heritage and its significance in peacebuilding, identity development, and cultural recognition. The approach consists of several essential steps:

1. **Literature Review:** The research process begins with a thorough examination of the source material. This step includes a thorough review of existing research, government papers, and cultural studies on intangible heritage in conflict zones, particularly in India. This provides an understanding of knowledge while also identifying gaps in the existing research.
2. **Resource Collection:** The key element of this research is the extensive data collection from numerous sources. Documents, articles, and reports about cultural traditions in Chhattisgarh, the impact of conflict on heritage, and local communities' responses to these problems are gathered. In addition, relevant data from government agencies, non-governmental groups, and cultural organisations is collected.
3. **Fieldwork:** The field trip is carried out to obtain an improved understanding of the local context and to interact with area residents. This involves excursions to conflict-affected areas of Chhattisgarh, particularly Bastar. The major purpose of fieldwork is to engage directly with local people, heritage custodians, and area reporters in order to collect information about their opinions, events, and the importance of their intangible heritage.
4. **Interviews and Surveys:** Organised surveys and interviews are done with members of the local community, historical custodians, and regional journalists. These interviews allow us to document their experiences, challenges, and goals for the protection of intangible heritage. Furthermore, surveys are aimed to collect useful information on the local population's views and feelings towards their cultural traditions, as well as the impact of conflict.
5. **Collaboration:** Joint efforts are being made with regional journalists and cultural enthusiasts who are knowledgeable about the region's past. Their points of view, connections, and local knowledge are crucial in knowing all aspects of the local culture and heritage.
6. **Cultural Documentation:** The paper presents information about cultural assets, particularly two popular intangible heritages from Bastar: the Bastar Dussehra celebration and the 'trial of the gods.' This consists of collecting oral histories, photographs, and other related media that show the richness of these traditions.

7. **Community Empowerment:** Empowering local communities is an important aspect of the research. The research aims to develop an awareness of pride and ownership in the local culture and heritage through a collaborative approach. It involves collaborating with communities to acknowledge their intangible tradition as their property and heritage, and encouraging them to take responsibility for its preservation.
8. **Expanding Recognition:** The research is focused on bringing these traditions to the broad area by showing Chhattisgarh's unique intangible heritage on a larger scale. The recognition is important not just for the preservation of cultural traditions, but also for changing people's perceptions of conflict-affected areas such as Bastar, which are frequently linked with conflict and insurgency.

This research paper explores a variety of methods to explore the subject of intangible heritage preservation in conflict zones in context. This project aims to bring intangible heritage to the forefront by connecting with regional communities, local reporters, and cultural enthusiasts, creating a feeling of pride and accountability among the local population, and promoting peace and identity in the conflict-affected region.

This researched information provides essential views into conflict zones' intangible heritage and its ability to build peace and identity.

### **Consequences and Impact:**

This study is expected to have several significant outcomes and impacts, both locally in Chhattisgarh and on a larger scale:

1. **Local Empowerment:** Development of local populations in conflict-affected areas is one of the key outcomes. These communities can develop a sense of pride in and accountability for their cultural traditions if their intangible heritage is recognised and promoted. This empowerment has the potential to have broad effects in terms of developing cultural pride and promoting the bonds of community.
2. **Strengthened Cultural Identity:** The study aims to maintain the cultural histories of people in conflict zones like as Bastar. By identifying and promoting their intangible legacy, these communities can shift from a label associated with violence and conflict to one that highlights their rich and unique cultural past.
3. **Peace Promotion:** As local communities develop their bonds with their cultural traditions, they are more likely to seek peaceful ways to express their identity. Individuals are less likely to engage in conflicts against the government, which may lead to a decrease in local support for extremist groups. Furthermore, supporting peace and stability in conflict zones is an important result of our research.
4. **Heritage Preservation:** This study promotes the preservation of cultural heritage by highlighting the value of intangible heritage. Intangible cultural heritage is at risk of being lost in conflict zones because it is often overlooked. Increased awareness can result in better preservation efforts, ensuring that these cultural traditions are passed down to future generations.
5. **Global Recognition:** This research aims to provide global acknowledgment for conflict-affected countries' intangible heritage. This not only protects cultural diversity but also highlights the beauty as well as the uniqueness of these traditions to the rest of the globe. Increased tourism, economic development, and international support for historic preservation can all result through global recognition.

6. **Social Change:** The results of this work has the potential to affect significant social change in conflict areas. It rejects the standard narrative of violence and insurgency in favour of a new narrative of cultural richness, heritage preservation, and local empowerment. This change in thinking has the ability to cause substantial social transformations.
7. **Policy Implications:** The outcomes of this study may have an impact on policy changes. Governments and international organisations may realise the worth of intangible heritage and provide more resources and support to its preservation in conflict zones. This could result in changes to laws and better historical conservation efforts.

Finally, the implications and significance of this research go beyond academic inquiry. It aspires to have a positive ripple effect in war-affected regions by focusing on intangible heritage in conflict zones, encouraging local empowerment, and facilitating broad recognition. The ultimate goal is to empower the local population, promote peace, protect cultural heritage, and raise awareness of the importance of cultural diversity in these areas.

Furthermore, promoting intangible heritage within local communities and getting broad recognition can have revolutionary effects. Inspiring local communities to be proud of and responsible for their cultural heritage reduces their vulnerability to extremist organisations.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, this study is an important step towards recognising the crucial significance of intangible heritage in conflict zones, with a particular focus on Chhattisgarh, India. The diverse method used in this study, which included research, conversations with local journalists, information about key intangible heritages, and community empowerment, provided insight on the actual meaning of these traditions. The effects and impacts of this research are far-reaching, and they give hope for positive transformation in conflict-affected areas.

This research lays the way for large social shifts by empowering local communities, encouraging a sense of ownership and pride in their intangible heritage, and highlighting the value of these traditions on a broad scale. It reduces the dominant narrative of violence and insurgency by offering a new narrative of cultural richness, heritage preservation, and local empowerment.

The results of the study include developing stronger cultural identities, promoting peace, preserving heritage, and garnering worldwide recognition for conflict-affected countries' unique cultural traditions. It conveys the importance of intangible heritage in preserving cultural diversity and provides a possible path to social change.

Finally, this study serves as a call to reframe the narrative and refocus attention on intangible heritage as a foundation for peace, identity, and a common human experience. It offers a fresh look at conflict-torn groups, highlighting the beauty and uniqueness of their cultural traditions while also contributing to a greater awareness of the importance of cultural diversity in these locations.

It underscores the importance of focusing on intangible heritage in conflict zones. The goal is that when these rich intangible heritages are protected and shared with the world, local communities will find pride and peace in their identities, and the global community will gain a better understanding for these regions' cultural diversity. This strategy not only protects cultural diversity but also encourages positive change in conflict zones, empowers local people, promotes peace, stability, and social transformation, and emphasises the necessity of protecting intangible heritage as a path to peace and richness in culture. By acknowledging these regions' cultural history as invaluable, this study paper pushes for global awareness



and understanding of conflict zones, ultimately contributing to a more peaceful and culturally enriched world.

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