



**PRESERVING TRIBAL WISDOM AND CULTURAL HERITAGE: A CASE  
STUDY OF THE THAKAR COMMUNITY**

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**ABSTRACT:**

*The Thakar community, a tribal group primarily residing in the Konkan region of Maharashtra, is a vital contributor to the Indian Culture and Tradition. Their traditional practices, deeply intertwined with nature, reflect a unique blend of ecological wisdom, artistic creativity, and sustainable living. Known for their Warli paintings and wood carving, the Thakars have preserved centuries-old narratives and cultural symbols through art, serving as custodians of India's rich tribal heritage. Additionally, their knowledge of forest ecosystems and medicinal plants highlights their role in biodiversity conservation and natural resource management.*

*This study delves into the Thakar community's contributions to IKS, focusing on their cultural expressions, ecological practices, and traditional medicine. It also examines the challenges faced by the community, including land dispossession, cultural erosion, and socio-economic marginalization. Employing a mixed-methods approach, including qualitative analysis of oral traditions and case studies of Warli art and sustainable forest practices, the research underscores the urgent need for preservation.*

*The findings reveal that while the Thakars' knowledge systems are invaluable, they face significant threats from modernization and urbanization. To address these challenges, the paper proposes strategies such as educational reforms, policy interventions, and community-driven initiatives aimed at integrating Thakar wisdom into national frameworks. By highlighting the relevance of Thakar knowledge in contemporary times, this research emphasizes the importance of preserving their cultural heritage as a vital component of India's intellectual and ecological identity.*

**Keywords: Thakar Community, Indigenous Wisdom, Tribal Art, Cultural Heritage, Sustainable Practices, Maharashtra.**

**INTRODUCTION:**

India is a land of diverse cultures and traditions, where its tribal communities play a pivotal role in preserving the country's rich heritage. Among these communities, the

Thakarcommunity, residing predominantly in the Konkan region of Maharashtra, stands out for its unique contributions to the Indian Cultural Heritage. For centuries, the Thakars have lived in harmony with nature,

developing practices and traditions that reflect deep ecological understanding, cultural creativity, and sustainable living. These practices, passed down through generations, form a vital part of India's intellectual and cultural identity.

The Thakar community is particularly known for its Warli art, a vibrant form of tribal painting that depicts scenes of everyday life, rituals, and nature through intricate yet simplistic patterns. This art form is not just a means of cultural expression but also a medium of storytelling, reflecting the community's worldview and values. Beyond art, the Thakars possess remarkable ecological wisdom, especially in sustainable forest management and the use of medicinal plants. Their practices in honey collection, mixed cropping, and water conservation exemplify their ability to coexist with nature while meeting their daily needs.

Despite these significant contributions, the Thakar community faces numerous challenges in the modern era. Deforestation and urbanization have disrupted their traditional way of life, while cultural assimilation and economic pressures have led to the gradual erosion of their knowledge systems. The younger generation is increasingly moving away from traditional practices, further threatening the survival of this heritage. These challenges underscore the urgent need to document, preserve, and

integrate the Thakar community's knowledge into national frameworks for cultural preservation and sustainable development.

This examines their contributions to art, ecology, and traditional medicine while highlighting the threats they face in a rapidly changing world. Furthermore, it discusses strategies to address these challenges, including policy interventions, educational reforms, and community-driven initiatives. By focusing on the Thakar community, this study seeks to emphasize the importance of tribal wisdom in addressing contemporary global challenges and preserving India's cultural diversity. The findings not only showcase the richness of the Thakar community's heritage but also highlight the broader need to safeguard the knowledge systems of India's tribal communities for future generations.

**OBJECTIVES:**

This research paper aims to explore and document the contributions of the Thakar community to the Indian Culture and Tradition while addressing the challenges faced by the community in preserving their cultural and ecological heritage. It also seeks to propose strategies for integrating Thakar knowledge into contemporary educational, policy, and sustainability frameworks to ensure its preservation and relevance in the modern world.

1. To document the cultural, ecological, and medicinal practices of the Thakar community and their role in the Indian Tradition.
2. To analyze the significance of Warli painting as a cultural and artistic expression unique to the Thakar community.
3. To study the ecological wisdom of the Thakars, including their sustainable forest practices, agriculture, and use of medicinal plants.
4. To identify the socio-economic and cultural challenges faced by the Thakar community in a rapidly modernizing world.
5. To evaluate the impact of deforestation, urbanization, and cultural assimilation on the Thakar way of life.
6. To propose strategies for preserving the Thakar community's knowledge systems through education, policy interventions, and community-led initiatives.
7. To advocate for the inclusion of tribal knowledge, particularly that of the Thakars, in national and global frameworks for sustainable development and cultural preservation.

**METHODOLOGY:**

The present study is purely a survey method in which structured

questionnaire is used as a tool and random sampling method was applied for collecting meaningful information. Interactions with 157 Thakar community people are also conducted wherever necessary. Total 113 duly filled in questionnaires were received from the community people.

**SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS:**

The present study is carried out in the village Otur and nearby suburbs of the Junnar tehsil, Maharashtra, India. The Thakar community residing out of the Junnar tehsil is excluded from the study.

**LITERATURE REVIEW:**

Existing literature on the Thakar community is limited, though studies on tribal knowledge systems highlight the relevance of their practices in ecological conservation and cultural preservation. Scholars such as Priyadarshini, Priya&Abhilash, Purushothaman, (2019a); Priyadarshini, Priya&Abhilash, P. (2019b) have underscored the critical role of tribal communities and their collaborative production of indigenous knowledge and in promoting sustainable development and addressing climate change in India, while also highlighting the challenges they face and the need for supportive policies. Lusseau, David & Mancini, Francesca. (2019) discusses the interdependencies among the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

and presents several important results regarding how these goals interact with one another. Whereas, Meena, Rajesh, et.al. (2019) underscored the urgent need for integrated approaches that combine traditional knowledge with modern agricultural practices to enhance the resilience of indigenous communities against climate change. Further, Rani and Agarwal (2019) research explores contemporary landscape themes within traditional Gond art, contributing valuable insights into the intersection of modern and traditional artistic expressions. The importance of recognizing and supporting the unique livelihood practices of the Gond tribes, which are deeply intertwined with their cultural identity and environmental stewardship. Indian artists were lucky enough to perceive and probe tribal art because India has been treasuring her characteristic traditional folk art since ages. (Gupta, C. S.). According to Mundhe, Eknath (2017), Thakar tribal women play a crucial role in managing natural, social, and economic resources, as well as agricultural development, but they remain marginalized due to illiteracy, traditions, and cultural constraints. Despite their significant contributions to family economies, they continue to face poverty and lack adequate support from the government and male-dominated systems. Focused efforts are needed to address these

systemic challenges and uplift their socio-economic status.

The survey conducted by Singh, et.al. (2012) revealed that Thakar communities in the Raigad district utilize 15 plant species for snake-bite treatment and 10 plant species for scorpion-bite, with various plant parts like roots, bark, and leaves employed. Notably, the Apocyanaceae family uniquely contributes to remedies for both ailments. Despite their isolation and limited communication, the tribes have developed consistent and effective traditional treatments for these venomous bites. Whereas, Pawar, S. G; et.al, (2016) documents 54 plant species used in traditional medicine, revealing new findings about their medicinal uses for ailments like stomachaches, wounds, burns, and arthritis. Leaves are the most commonly used plant part, highlighting the rich phyto-diversity of the study area. With traditional healers and their knowledge dwindling, urgent efforts are needed to document, preserve, and pass on this heritage to future generations. On the same lines, Shinde, Y. P., Arangale, K. B., &Jadhav, S. A. (2017) examined the Kokanitribals of Ahmednagar district and revealed that they possessed traditional knowledge of medicinal plants, using 19 species from 16 families to treat wounds and diseases. This orally passed knowledge highlights the potential for discovering herbal medicines through further research. Also the study of Kamble, S. Y.

et.al. (2009) documents 140 plant species from 128 genera and 61 families used by the Thakar community for medicinal and other purposes. Among these, 28 plant species with ethnobotanical potential have been recorded for the first time in Maharashtra, highlighting their unique traditional knowledge.

Further, Jadvah (2022) highlights the rich diversity of medicinal plants in KadegaonTahsil, where traditional knowledge is primarily preserved by elderly and middle-aged individuals. Documenting this knowledge is crucial for preserving plant resources and promoting cost-effective, safe herbal treatments for ailments. Medicinal plants remain integral to the healthcare practices and cultural life of the local community. On the other hand, Mathew, Somasundaram and Thitame (2020) revealed that rice is the staple food for the MahadevKoli and Thakar communities, supplemented by wild green leafy vegetables gathered from forests during the rainy season. While pulses and wild foods like fruits, meat, and eggs are consumed, they are not staples. Dietary patterns have evolved with the introduction of packaged foods and market-bought items, highlighting a shift from traditional diets to modern food practices.

Mahajan and Kalebere (2023) recently conducted a survey on Indian tribes and revealed that they rely heavily on forests and natural resources

for their livelihoods, with marginalized households and women bearing the brunt of increasing poverty through greater dependence on communal resources. Their exclusion from decision-making processes, coupled with control of ecological systems by large organizations, deepens their socio-economic challenges. Sustainable development requires empowering tribal communities by involving them in ecological management and balancing their resource dependence with livelihood preservation. The study undertaken by Uniyal SK; et.al. (2006) highlights the reliance of ChhotaBhangal's local communities on 35 medicinal plants, including herbs, shrubs, trees, and climbers, for treating 21 ailments ranging from stomach aches to complex disorders. Knowledge of medicinal plant use is primarily held by elders (40-55 years), with younger generations leaning towards market remedies, risking loss of traditional practices. Many plants are locally available, while alpine species like *Aconitum heterophyllum* and *Picrorhizakurrooa* are highly traded due to their medicinal value, raising concerns about overharvesting and resource degradation.

A comprehensive study conducted by Kandari, L. S., Bisht, V. K., Bhardwaj, M., & Thakur, A. K. (2014) highlights how traditional beliefs, rituals, and taboos have played a significant role in conserving

biodiversity in India. In the Chamoli district of Uttarakhand, a cultural practice requires newly married couples to plant a tree at the bride's home. This custom, which gained popularity in the 1980s, not only fosters a connection to nature but also contributes to awareness and plantation movements such as the "MaitiAndolan." These movements promote tree planting as a way to combat deforestation, stabilize the soil, and prevent landslides in the hilly regions.

Certain plants, like *Saussureaobvallata* (Brahma Kamal) and *Delphinium vestitum*, are protected due to their sacred association with local deities. Only village priests are allowed to pluck these plants during specific ceremonies, ensuring their conservation. These practices are examples of how traditional beliefs and customs can aid in protecting valuable plant species.

Additionally, sacred groves (SGs)—forest patches preserved due to religious or cultural significance—help prevent soil erosion, conserve water, and act as biodiversity hotspots. For instance, villagers enhance water bodies near SGs for improved water management during droughts. SGs also have a high capacity for carbon sequestration, contributing to climate regulation.

A research on Chitrakathi paintings, a 300–400-year-old traditional Indian art form was

conducted by Gogate and Chauhan (2021), depict mythological stories like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* through visuals, narration, music, and songs. With the rise of modern entertainment, their popularity declined. Traditionally crafted using handmade paper, bamboo brushes, and natural colors, the paintings varied in color palettes and styles, symbolically representing characters and themes. Researchers identified two primary styles, Paithan and Pinguli, and explored ways to modernize the art through product development, emphasizing home décor and souvenirs. Further, according to Gaonkar, Manik (2018), Abhyankar and Kaware (2021); the survival and revival of Chitrakathi, a traditional tribal art form rooted in the Thakar tribe, face significant challenges due to societal modernization, lack of awareness, and systemic neglect. While its storytelling once connected moral lessons to daily life, modern performances often fail to blend knowledge with entertainment, reducing its appeal. Additionally, casteist ideologies and insufficient government support hinder its inclusion in contemporary culture and art markets. For Chitrakathi to thrive, society must embrace it beyond its ritualistic and traditional confines, foster inclusive perspectives, and adopt a holistic approach to integrating it into modern creative and economic frameworks.



Thakur & Agarwal (2022) and Srivastava (2019) claim that Warli paintings, an art form created by the Warli tribes of Maharashtra, are typically found on the mud walls of dwellings and represent their social lives and cultural histories. Instead of mythological themes, the artwork emphasizes rhythmically structured human and animal representations as well as commonplace activities. These mostly female-created artworks have a monochromatic white palette created from ground rice paste, with sporadic touches of red and yellow. Warli art's popularity and reach have expanded as it has moved to paper and canvas over time. The simplicity and diversity of Indian tribal art are demonstrated by this art form, which is sometimes compared to the Madhubani paintings of Bihar.

The study underscores how cultural and religious beliefs have been intricately woven into the fabric of biodiversity conservation in India. These practices are rooted in traditional knowledge and provide sustainable solutions for preserving flora, fauna, and ecosystems.

However, the Thakars' specific contributions, especially in art and medicinal practices, require more focused attention. This review consolidates available data while identifying gaps in research on this community.

## MAJOR FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION:

### 1. Contributions of the Thakar Community to the Indian Tradition and Culture:

#### a. Art and Cultural Practices:

Among the main traditions of the Thakar community, the tradition of Warli painting, Ideal Saari style of females (लुगड्याचीखोच), Indaar dance (इंडारनृत्य), worshipping God (देव्हारापूजन) and wearing traditional clothes for festivals is still being preserved by the Thakar community. In this, folk tales and the essence of the social life of the community are painted on the walls of our houses. In earlier days the Thakar women community used to prepare for war by wrapping their loin cloths horizontally. As a part of their enriched tradition this practice is also seen on special occasions in the Thakar community. Further the Thakar community has an ancient tradition of living in clans and they have been establishing their deities in the name of their ancestors. Each clan has a separate deity and their temples are established and worshipped by particular clan. One more tradition of the thakar community is the Dandar dance wearing the traditional clothes. It is practiced on special occasions like weddings, processions and Fairs. However men are sometimes prohibited in this dance.

Apart from this, festivals, ceremonies, and rituals among the Thakar community play a significant

role in their social, religious, and cultural lives. These celebrations place an emphasis on environmental worship and deepen the bond with nature. Additionally, society unites to foster fraternity and harmony. Ceremonies aid in the preservation of cultural heritage and the transmission of knowledge between generations. Additionally, from an economic perspective, handcraft sales produce jobs, therefore the significance of festivals contributes to the overall improvement of the Thakar community's way of life.

#### **b. Ecological Wisdom:**

Using sustainable means to harvest resources like firewood, honey, and medicinal plants, Thakars have a deep awareness of forest ecosystems. Their farming, like mixed cropping with both, traditional methods of farming using modern technologies wherever necessary, guarantee the preservation of biodiversity and soil fertility.

#### **c. Traditional Medicine:**

The community uses locally accessible plants as herbal medicines for common illnesses. For example, they treat fever with the bark of some trees and stomach problems with their roots. It is observed that the Thakar community treats patients with a variety of natural treatments and medicinal herbs. Indian gooseberries (Amla) help with digestion and strengthen the immune system, while sacred basil helps with colds, coughs, and fevers. Malabar nut (Adulsa) is used

to treat cough and respiratory conditions, whereas the heart leaved moonseed or the Giloy (Gulvel) is used to treat fever and infectious infections. Mango turmeric (AmbaHaldi) works well against skin conditions and irritation, while turmeric is applied as an ointment to wounds. Behda (Terminaliabelirica) helps with colds and stomach issues, while Blackboard plant (Saatvin) helps with joint discomfort. While the bark and Banyan tree are used to cure wounds, dermatitis, and dental issues, castor oil is utilized to relieve joint pain and cleanse the stomach. In addition, lemon leaves have antibacterial properties and can effectively treat skin conditions. In addition to preserving environmentally friendly therapeutic methods, the Thakar community's traditional medical knowledge shows their intimate affinity with nature.

### **2. Challenges Faced by the Thakar Community:**

#### **a. Loss of Land and Resources:**

The traditional territories of these communities have been overrun by urbanization and deforestation, upsetting their way of life and cultural customs.

#### **b. Cultural Erosion:**

As more and more young people choose metropolitan lifestyles, traditional knowledge and customs are declining.

#### **c. Marginalization:**



They face more socioeconomic difficulties as a result of little representation in policymaking and poor access to healthcare and education.

### **3. Strategies for Preservation and Integration:**

#### **a. Policy Interventions:**

Securing land ownership for the Thakar group can be facilitated by the Forest Rights Act (2006) being implemented effectively. Initiatives for cultural preservation that honor and promote their practices and art can be introduced.

#### **b. Educational Reforms:**

Integrating ecological principles and Thakar art into school curricula to promote knowledge and appreciation among the general public could be initiated.

#### **c. Community-Led Initiatives:**

Supporting cooperatives that promote the community's art forms and forest-based products, ensuring economic sustainability could be initiated. Efforts could be made for digitizing their oral histories and traditions to preserve their cultural heritage.

### **CONCLUSION:**

The Thakar community's contributions to the Indian Culture and Tradition are profound, encompassing art, ecological wisdom, and medicinal practices. The Thakars are the main practitioners of warli painting, which acts as a visual record of their beliefs

and history. They feel that their culture and tradition must be preserved as a matter of heritage and passed on to the 21<sup>st</sup> century generation through inclusion of the same in education system. Steps must be taken to guarantee that the community gains financially from its rising prominence. However, these contributions are at risk due to socio-economic pressures and cultural homogenization. Preserving the Thakar community's knowledge and integrating it into national development frameworks is essential for safeguarding India's tribal heritage. Further The community thinks that the Government regulations and education can be crucial in preserving the community's cultural legacy. Education will enable their youth to appreciate the value of their traditional arts, medical knowledge, and cultural customs and to carry on this legacy in the future. Teaching the community's art in schools, including Warli painting, plant medicine, and traditional living, helps raise awareness among the next generation. Initiatives like putting the Forest Rights Act (2006) into effect, offering funding for the preservation of cultural heritage, and creating a direct marketplace for Thakar community items are examples of government policies that should be expressly included. Additionally, digitization can help chronicle and preserve the Thakar community's artifacts and medical practices for future generations. The

Thakar community will be able to sustain their tradition and become economically independent with the aid of education and policies.

By recognizing the Thakars as custodians of invaluable wisdom and supporting their cultural and economic empowerment, India can ensure that this vibrant community continues to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

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