



## Crisis of tribal identity under bureaucratic control: Parab (2025)

Balaram Swain

Lecturer, Department of Political Science, Government Dav College Koraput, Odisha, India

### Abstract

Tribal identity is associated with its distinct culture. Tribal culture and identity belong to a particular land, just as the Paraba tribal festival belongs to Koraput district, Odisha, and represents the identity of Koraput's tribal culture. The study examines how state machinery has led to the disappearance of local tribal identity from the Paraba festival in 2025. Using qualitative research approaches, including field observation, interviews with tribal performers and community members, and analysis of festival programming and publicity, the study analyses how the involvement of non-indigenous artists and non-indigenous cultural expressions sidelines Koraput tribal culture, reducing space for local performers. Our paper finds that Paraba has transformed from a tribal identity-based cultural festival into a bureaucratically managed programme. This transformation shows how state machinery renders tribal authenticity invisible and displaces tribal identity from Paraba.

**Keywords:** Tribal identity, Paraba Festival, bureaucratic control, state machinery, cultural appropriation, indigenous culture, tribal authenticity, cultural marginalization

### Introduction

Tribal communities have unique cultures, traditions, and customs that are deeply connected to a particular region. The unique cultural expressions they perform are linked to their specific land and reflect their ways of life. The tribal community collectively performs their distinct cultural practices, rituals, and expresses their beliefs. Such gatherings of tribal communities for expressing their unique culture can be called a tribal festival. The tribal festival evolves as an identity of that particular place. The festival showcases the unique dance forms, songs, and rituals of that specific tribal region. Through these festivals, the community shares their traditional knowledge and belief systems with the younger generation and also preserves their history and ancestral traditions. They strengthen their social bonding and collective identity through active participation.

Tribal festivals play an important role in expressing the identity of tribal communities across India. India has a large number of tribal cultures, and each state is known for its unique tribal traditions, customs, and practices. Tribal culture provides the identity of each state at the national level. Odisha, a state in eastern India, has a large number of tribal diversities, with many tribal areas and tribal festivals representing the cultural heritage of its tribal people. The Paraba Festival stands out as a unique festival among other tribal festivals of Odisha.

Paraba, the tribal festival, is one of the most significant festivals among the tribals of Koraput and is organised by the district administration of Koraput. Since 1996, it has been organised by the District Council of Culture, Koraput, with the aim of finding hidden talent and preserving the rich tribal culture of the region. Through this festival, the state promotes its tribal traditions in the context of the growing risk of tribal cultural extinction in this globalised era.

Paraba is also considered a tribal movement to express identity and assert the dominance of tribal culture within the state's cultural heritage. The Dangar festival or Paraba strengthens the presence of tribal culture by showcasing the

unique dance forms, arts, and crafts of Koraput tribals. Visitors from across the globe come to explore the rich diversity of tribal art forms, including tribal paintings, dance forms such as Dhimsa tribal dance, Kaathi Naach, Soura painting, and Dokra metal casting. In this festival, tribal communities display their ways of life through indigenous food, traditional ornaments, rituals, and cultural practices. Thus, Paraba also functions as a central hub of cultural tourism in Koraput, bringing together tradition, identity, and heritage on a shared platform.

In recent years, the nature of Paraba has changed, particularly in 2025. Paraba appears to be losing its tribal identity. Today, Paraba seems more like a bureaucratically organised programme designed primarily for mass entertainment and tourism rather than a community-rooted tribal festival. The growing involvement of non-tribal or outside artists and the increasing visibility of non-Koraputia cultural performances have significantly reshaped the character of the festival. Paraba has become dominated by non-indigenous cultural dances and art forms, which has reduced the presence and visibility of tribal identity within the festival. As a result, Paraba has been transformed from a community-led cultural festival into a predominantly bureaucratically managed programme. Tribal communities, who were once the central participants and cultural bearers of Paraba, are now positioned mainly as spectators in their own festival. This transformation of Paraba raises serious questions about whether it still remains a truly tribal festival.

Based on qualitative approach, the study examines how paraba its nature. The field visit, personal interview with tribal performer and analysis of festivals events programs brochure explore how bureaucratic controls effect the tribal presence. it explains whether state machinery strengthen or weaken the tribal identity in paraba. The study provide foundation for the conceptual Framework, which explore the relationship between state machinery, cultural practices and tribal identity in the context of paraba.

## Conceptual framework

### 1. Tribal Identity and Culture — Explained in Detail

Tribal identity is not only about belonging to a particular ethnic group; it is deeply rooted in everyday life, land, language, beliefs, rituals, and collective memory. For tribal communities, culture is not something separate from life—it is lived through their relationship with forests, rivers, hills, ancestors, and community traditions.

Festivals play a very important role in maintaining this identity. They are not merely celebrations but spaces where tribal communities express who they are. Through songs, dances, rituals, crafts, food, and storytelling, they pass down their history and values to younger generations. In this sense, festivals act as living cultural schools.

However, when festivals are taken away from the community and become controlled by external authorities, their original meaning begins to weaken. If tribal people are no longer central participants but become mere performers or spectators, their identity starts to lose visibility and strength. This can lead to cultural fragmentation, where traditions are displayed but not truly lived or owned by the community.

In your study, this idea helps you argue that Paraba is not just a festival but a key space of tribal identity in Koraput—and any change in Paraba affects tribal identity itself.

### 2. Festivalisation of Culture

Festivalisation means the transformation of traditional, community-based festivals into organised events managed by the state for tourism, entertainment, and publicity.

Originally, Paraba was likely a local tribal gathering where people participated freely, shared traditions, and expressed their culture in an organic way. It was community-led, meaningful, and rooted in everyday tribal life.

Under festivalisation, however, Paraba becomes more like a cultural show or exhibition. Performances are scheduled, stages are built, non-tribal artists are invited, and the festival is marketed as a tourist attraction. Culture becomes a product to be displayed rather than a lived experience.

In this process, indigenous culture is often reduced to symbols—colourful dances, paintings, and crafts—while its deeper spiritual and social meaning is lost. Tribal traditions are presented in a decorative way but removed from their original context and community control.

### 3. State Cultural Governance

State cultural governance refers to how the government and district administration manage, regulate, and control cultural events like Paraba.

On the surface, the administration claims that its involvement helps preserve tribal culture, provide platforms to artists, and promote Koraput's heritage. However, your framework suggests that this involvement is not neutral—it is shaped by bureaucratic priorities.

Instead of focusing on tribal needs and voices, the administration often prioritises: Large crowds, Media visibility, Political representation, Tourism promotion, Cultural branding of Odisha

This means decisions about Paraba—such as who performs, what is shown, and how culture is represented—are made by officials rather than tribal communities. As a result, non-tribal artists get more space, while local tribal performers are pushed to the margins.

This creates a power imbalance. The state holds authority, resources, and decision-making power, while tribal communities lose control over their own cultural festival. Instead of being cultural owners, they become cultural subjects managed by the administration.

### Literature review

The existing literature provides theoretical insights into the interconnectedness between tribal festivals and tribal identity and highlights how these festivals represent the tribal way of life. Previous studies explain the process of festivalisation of culture, showing how traditional festivals are often transformed into entertainment programmes and why famous outside artists are invited. In this regard, scholars such as Andy Bennett and Jodie Taylor's concept of "festivalisation of culture" provides a significant theoretical framework for understanding the changing nature of festivals. Similar trends can also be observed in Indian tribal festivals. However, in the context of Paraba, the existing literature has not sufficiently covered this perspective. Therefore, this study examines how Paraba, a tribal festival, has undergone a transformation in its identity due to bureaucratic intervention.

Scholars across anthropology and sociology have long conceptualized tribal identity as rooted in distinct cultural practices, language, and social structures that differentiate indigenous communities from dominant societies. Tribal identity is both a lived experience and a symbolic system of meaning that shapes social interactions and group belonging. Works such as *Real Indians: Identity and the Survival of Native America* illustrate how indigenous identities are contested when external criteria (legal, biological, administrative) are imposed on communities, underscoring the challenges Indigenous peoples face in asserting self-defined identity against mainstream frameworks.

Anthropological theory also highlights how non-state-centered power relations are fundamental to tribal societies. For instance, Pierre Clastres' iconic work *Society Against the State* argues that many tribal societies actively resist centralized authority and coercive power, emphasizing egalitarian structures and autonomy in cultural governance. This perspective is key to understanding how external state control can disrupt indigenous modes of identity formation and expression.

Cultural festivals have been recognized as critical sites for the construction and performance of collective identity. Studies show that indigenous festivals are not merely entertainment but embodied expressions of cultural knowledge, ritual, and social cohesion. Traditional Parabas, like Chait Parab and other festival forms in Odisha, historically celebrate seasonal cycles, community rites, and performative traditions (music, dance, rituals) that enact tribal cosmologies and social relations.

However, academic research on festivals also points out that state involvement often transforms the meanings of these events. For example, research in tourism and cultural studies shows that cultural festivals organized under bureaucratic or tourism frameworks tend to foreground national or regional identity narratives, sometimes at the expense of localized, indigenous symbolic meanings.

The growth of state-directed cultural festivals—in the name of heritage preservation or tourism—has sparked debate regarding authenticity and appropriation. Cultural studies

literature on Indigenous appropriation, including case studies from contexts such as North America, shows how non-Indigenous actors can reframe or commodify tribal cultural elements for broader consumption, leading to a dilution of original meanings and power dynamics that marginalize the originating communities.

This pattern resonates with broader critiques of bureaucratic cultural management, where the involvement of state institutions, professional organizers, and external artists reshapes the festival content away from traditional tribal priorities toward standardized, market-friendly forms. Such processes align with concerns raised in globalisation literature that external cultural flows and institutional pressures can weaken local identity anchors and transform symbolic forms as part of broader sociopolitical dynamics.

Empirical research from Indian contexts reveals similar tensions between indigenous cultural practice and administrative frameworks. For instance, studies on the displacement and sociocultural transformations of tribes in Odisha show that development policies and administrative pressures often undermine traditional livelihoods and cultural systems, contributing to identity disruption.

Ethnographic literature from tribal festivals in Odisha and neighbouring regions also demonstrates how state-organized cultural events sometimes blend tribal traditions with external performance genres, raising questions about who defines the festival's cultural agenda and for whom the festival is staged.

### 1. Objectives of the Study

- To critically analysis the changing nature of the Paraba festival in Koraput, particularly in 2025.
- To analyse how state machinery management, reduce the tribal identity from paraba.
- To examine the level of tribal participation and visibility in Paraba 2025.

### 2. Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative research approach to examine how Paraba has changed its nature over time. The study analyses issues of culture, identity, tribal experiences, and emotions. A qualitative approach is adopted because these aspects cannot be measured through numerical or statistical data.

Field observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis are the core methods of this study. Through field observation, the study closely examined the festival's administrative arrangements, who performed on stage, whose culture was more visible, audience behaviour, and the comparative visibility of tribal and non-tribal performers. This method helped assess whether Paraba functions as a community-led tribal festival or as a bureaucratically managed programme.

The study also conducted in-depth interviews with community leaders, tribal artists, tribal youth, and elders to understand their personal experiences, perceptions, and feelings regarding Paraba. These interviews provided insights into how tribal participants experience the festival under increasing administrative control.

For data analysis, the study carefully examined festival brochures, official programmes, media reports, and social media content related to Paraba. This helped identify differences between government policy representation and ground reality. While the state projects Paraba as a tribal

cultural festival, the organisational arrangements often sideline tribal communities from meaningful participation. Overall, this methodology provides a holistic understanding of Paraba and highlights how state machinery has contributed to changing the nature of the festival.

### 3. Results and Discussion

- The findings indicate a significant transformation in the nature of the Paraba festival in 2025. Traditionally, Paraba functioned as a community-centred tribal festival, rooted in indigenous rituals, local art forms, and collective participation of Koraput's tribal communities. However, field observations and analysis of the 2025 programme reveal a shift towards a formal, stage-based, and centrally curated event. The festival schedule prioritised choreographed performances, modern sound systems, scripted cultural presentations, and non-tribal dance and music forms. The spatial arrangement of the festival further reflected this change, with barricaded stages and controlled access areas replacing open community spaces.

This transformation aligns with broader scholarly discussions on the institutionalisation and festivalisation of indigenous culture, where cultural events are restructured to suit administrative aesthetics and public spectacle. The 2025 Paraba festival reflects a movement away from lived cultural practice toward performative display, reducing the festival's role as a medium of tribal self-expression. Such changes weaken the organic relationship between land, community, and culture that historically defined Paraba as an expression of Koraput's tribal identity.

- The study finds that the increasing involvement of state machinery in planning, funding, and managing Paraba has resulted in the marginalisation of indigenous cultural elements. Official committees and bureaucratic authorities exercised control over performer selection, programme design, and publicity narratives. Non-indigenous artists and cultural troupes were invited to represent "tribal culture," while local tribal performers reported limited opportunities and reduced performance time. Government publicity materials largely portrayed Paraba as a "district-level cultural event" rather than a tribal festival rooted in Koraput's indigenous communities.

These findings reflect how bureaucratic governance transforms cultural ownership, shifting control from indigenous communities to administrative institutions. State-led cultural management often prioritises visibility, uniformity, and symbolic representation over authenticity. In doing so, tribal identity becomes diluted and rendered invisible, replaced by a homogenised cultural narrative that fits bureaucratic and political agendas. The Paraba festival in 2025 thus exemplifies how state machinery can unintentionally—or strategically—displace indigenous identity while claiming to promote tribal culture.

- Empirical data from interviews and field observation reveal a decline in meaningful tribal participation in Paraba 2025. Although tribal individuals were present, their roles were largely limited to performative and symbolic functions, such as brief dance performances or ceremonial appearances. Decision-making processes related to festival planning and execution excluded

local tribal leaders, artists, and cultural custodians. Many tribal performers expressed feelings of alienation, stating that Paraba no longer represented their lived culture but had become an event “for outsiders.”

The reduced participation and visibility of tribal communities highlight a process of cultural exclusion within inclusion—where tribal presence is maintained for legitimacy, but genuine cultural authority is denied. This mirrors critical debates in indigenous studies that argue symbolic inclusion often masks structural marginalisation. The invisibility of tribal voices in Paraba 2025 underscores a deeper crisis of identity, wherein the festival ceases to function as a space of cultural continuity and instead becomes a tool of representational politics under bureaucratic control.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that Paraba 2025 represents a critical moment in the erosion of tribal identity under state-managed cultural frameworks. While the festival continues to carry the label of a tribal event, its content, governance, and representation increasingly exclude the very communities it claims to celebrate. The study thus contributes to broader discussions on indigenous cultural governance, highlighting the need for community-led cultural management to preserve tribal identity and authenticity.

### Conclusion

This study critically examined the changing nature of the Paraba festival in Koraput district, Odisha, with specific focus on the 2025 celebration. Traditionally rooted in the indigenous cultural practices of Koraput’s tribal communities, Paraba has historically functioned as a symbol of tribal identity, collective memory, and cultural continuity. Using qualitative research methods such as field observation, interviews with tribal performers and community members, and analysis of festival programmes and publicity materials, the study explored how increasing state involvement has reshaped the festival’s structure and meaning.

The findings reveal that Paraba 2025 underwent a significant transformation from a community-driven tribal festival into a bureaucratically managed cultural event. The increasing dominance of state machinery in planning and execution led to the inclusion of non-indigenous cultural forms and performers, while local tribal expressions were marginalised. Tribal participation became largely symbolic, with reduced decision-making power and limited visibility. As a result, the festival’s original role as a platform for indigenous self-representation and cultural expression was weakened, leading to a visible crisis of tribal identity.

The study concludes that the Paraba festival in 2025 exemplifies how bureaucratic control over indigenous cultural events can lead to the erosion of tribal identity and cultural authenticity. While state involvement is often justified in the name of promotion, development, or cultural preservation, excessive administrative control risks transforming living tribal traditions into staged performances detached from their social and cultural roots. The marginalisation of local tribal voices and performers in Paraba reflects a broader pattern of cultural displacement, where indigenous identity is rendered invisible within its own cultural space.

For Paraba to retain its significance as a tribal identity-based festival, there is a critical need for community-led

cultural governance, ensuring meaningful participation of tribal communities in decision-making, programme design, and representation. Recognising tribal communities not merely as performers but as cultural custodians is essential for safeguarding the authenticity, dignity, and continuity of indigenous traditions. The study thus calls for policy frameworks that balance institutional support with indigenous autonomy, enabling festivals like Paraba to remain true to their cultural origins while adapting sustainably to contemporary contexts.

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