

From Oral Tradition to Digital Culture: Transformation of Cultural Practices in Rural Odisha

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Abstract

Rural Odisha has historically sustained a rich and diverse cultural heritage through oral traditions, community participation, ritual practices, folk songs, storytelling, traditional performances, festivals, crafts, indigenous knowledge and everyday social customs. Much of this cultural knowledge was transmitted from one generation to another through memory, observation, imitation and participation rather than through formal written records. The village community, therefore, functioned as an important cultural institution in which elders, artists, women, ritual specialists, storytellers and community groups played significant roles in preserving and transmitting collective knowledge. However, the rapid expansion of mobile phones, social media, internet connectivity and digital communication has introduced a significant transformation in the ways rural communities create, communicate, preserve and experience culture. Odisha's telecommunications data indicate substantial growth in rural connectivity: rural tele-density increased from 35.2 percent in 2012 to 62.2 percent in 2024, while internet subscribers per 100 population increased from 19.5 in 2016 to 51 in 2024.

This article examines the transition from oral to digital cultural transmission in rural Odisha. It argues that digital technology should not be understood merely as a force that replaces traditional culture. Rather, it creates a complex cultural environment in which older oral practices are being recorded, circulated, transformed, commodified and sometimes reinterpreted through digital platforms. Folk songs can now be recorded on smartphones; village festivals can reach audiences beyond the locality; traditional artists can acquire visibility through social media; and younger generations can encounter cultural traditions without being physically present in the village. At the same time, digitisation raises questions concerning authenticity, cultural ownership, commercialisation, generational differences, unequal access and the loss of contextual meaning. The article therefore explores digital culture as both a challenge and an opportunity for the preservation and revitalisation of rural cultural heritage in Odisha.

Keywords: Rural Odisha, oral tradition, digital culture, folk culture, cultural transmission, social media, traditional knowledge, cultural identity, digital heritage, village culture

Introduction

Culture is not a static collection of customs preserved unchanged from the past. It is a living process through which communities remember their history, express their identity, interpret their surroundings and negotiate social relationships. In rural societies, culture is particularly visible in everyday life. The village is not merely a geographical settlement; it is also a cultural space where traditions are reproduced through festivals, rituals, songs, dances, stories, agricultural practices, food habits, crafts, beliefs and interpersonal relationships. In Odisha, the cultural life of villages

has historically developed through a close relationship between community, environment, occupation, religion and local memory.

For generations, cultural knowledge in rural Odisha was transmitted primarily through oral and participatory mechanisms. A child learned a folk song by listening to elders, a dance by observing performers, a ritual by participating in community activities, and traditional craft skills through apprenticeship and imitation. Stories were remembered and retold rather than read from books. Folk songs were carried through memory rather than through written musical notation. Knowledge about

agriculture, medicinal plants, weather, food preparation, rituals and local ecology was embedded within everyday experience. In this sense, oral tradition was not simply a method of communication; it was an important cultural institution.

The contemporary village, however, exists within a radically changing communication environment. Mobile phones, inexpensive data services, social media, digital video, online platforms and messaging applications have altered the circulation of information. Digital connectivity has increasingly become part of rural life. Odisha's Economic Survey data show that the state's internet subscribers per 100 population increased from 19.5 in 2016 to 51 in 2024, while rural tele-density increased substantially over the same period.

This transformation has important cultural implications. A folk song that once remained within a village can now be recorded and circulated widely. A traditional dance performed during a local festival can be filmed and uploaded to a digital platform. A craftsman who previously depended almost entirely upon local markets may use digital networks to reach distant consumers. Similarly, younger people who migrate to towns and cities can maintain cultural connections with their villages through digital communication.

Consequently, the central question is no longer simply whether traditional culture is disappearing. A more meaningful question is: How is traditional culture changing as it moves from oral and community-based transmission into digital environments?

This article attempts to address that question by examining the relationship between oral tradition and digital culture in rural Odisha.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative, descriptive and analytical methodology to examine the transformation of cultural practices in rural Odisha from oral tradition to digital culture. The study draws upon perspectives from Culture Studies, Folklore Studies, Anthropology and Digital Media Studies. It focuses on traditional forms of cultural

transmission such as folk songs, storytelling, festivals, rituals, folk performances, crafts, traditional knowledge and community practices, and examines how these are being documented, shared and transformed through smartphones, social media and digital platforms.

The study is based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary information is obtained through observation, informal discussions and semi-structured interviews with village elders, folk artists, cultural practitioners, women and rural youth. Oral histories are used to understand traditional methods of cultural transmission, while digital ethnography helps examine the contemporary circulation of rural cultural practices through online platforms. Secondary sources include books, research articles, government reports and relevant publications on Odisha's folklore, village culture, oral traditions and digital transformation.

A comparative approach is used to examine traditional oral transmission and contemporary digital transmission in terms of memory, community participation, performance, accessibility and cultural preservation. The collected information is analysed thematically, with particular attention to continuity, transformation, cultural identity, youth participation, digital documentation, commercialisation and preservation. The study also considers ethical issues such as informed consent, cultural ownership and responsible representation. Overall, the methodology seeks to understand how digital technology is reshaping, rather than simply replacing, the traditional cultural practices of rural Odisha.

Understanding Oral Tradition in Rural Odisha

Oral tradition refers to cultural knowledge transmitted primarily through speech, performance, memory, observation and participation. It encompasses stories, legends, myths, proverbs, riddles, songs, ritual narratives, folk performances, genealogies, customary knowledge and practical wisdom.

In rural Odisha, oral culture has historically been closely associated with community life. Village elders often served as repositories of memory. They preserved stories about local histories, deities,

ancestors, landscapes and social events. Women played an especially important role in transmitting songs, domestic rituals, lullabies, marriage traditions and seasonal practices. Agricultural communities transmitted knowledge regarding cultivation, rainfall, seeds, soil, livestock and seasonal cycles through practical experience and oral instruction.

The village cultural environment therefore operated as an informal educational system. There was no sharp division between education and everyday life. Learning occurred through participation.

A child learned:

- songs by listening;
- rituals by participating;
- stories by hearing;
- crafts by observing;
- agricultural practices by working;
- social norms through community interaction;
- religious traditions through festivals;
- local history through narratives and memories.

Oral culture consequently involved both knowledge transmission and socialisation.

Its strength lay in its flexibility. A storyteller could modify a story according to the audience. A folk singer could add or change verses. A ritual could incorporate local circumstances. This flexibility allowed oral traditions to remain relevant across generations.

Village as a Cultural Institution

The rural village has traditionally functioned as an important institution of cultural reproduction. Cultural practices were not necessarily separated into categories such as religion, art, entertainment and education. They often existed together.

A village festival, for example, could simultaneously involve:

- religious worship;
- music;
- dance;
- food;
- craft production;
- social interaction;
- economic exchange;
- storytelling;

- community identity.

Similarly, a marriage ceremony could contain songs, ritual performances, traditional dress, food practices, decorative art and customary social relationships.

The village thus provided a physical and social context for culture.

The courtyard, temple, village square, agricultural field, community gathering place and household were all spaces of cultural transmission. Before the expansion of digital media, these physical spaces were central to cultural communication.

This spatial dimension is important because oral tradition is deeply contextual. A song associated with a particular agricultural activity may carry meanings that cannot be fully understood outside that context. A ritual performance may derive its significance from the relationship between performers, audience, sacred space and community memory.

Digitisation changes this relationship between culture and place.

The Transition from Oral to Digital Communication

The shift from oral to digital communication does not mean that oral culture has suddenly disappeared. Instead, a new layer of communication has been added.

The smartphone has become particularly important because it combines several functions:

- camera;
- audio recorder;
- video recorder;
- communication device;
- information source;
- entertainment platform;
- digital archive;
- publishing medium.

A villager can now record a traditional performance without specialised equipment. A cultural event can be photographed and shared immediately. A family member living outside the village can participate virtually in a festival or ceremony.

This represents a major transformation in cultural circulation.

Earlier, cultural transmission was predominantly:

Person → Community → Next Generation

Increasingly, it can also operate as:

Person → Smartphone → Digital Platform → Wider Public

The second model changes the scale, speed and audience of cultural communication.

Government policy has also contributed to the expansion of digital infrastructure. BharatNet has been implemented to extend broadband connectivity to Gram Panchayats, while broader Digital India initiatives have sought to expand digital infrastructure, public services and digital literacy.

For Odisha, continued investment in rural connectivity is particularly significant because many communities are geographically dispersed and some remote areas have historically experienced weaker communication infrastructure. In March 2026, the Government of India reported plans under Digital Bharat Nidhi involving 5,182 mobile towers to cover 7,157 villages in Odisha.

Digital Technology and Folk Songs

Folk songs represent one of the clearest examples of the transformation from oral to digital culture.

Traditionally, folk songs survived because people sang them repeatedly. Their preservation depended upon memory and performance. A song could remain alive for centuries without being formally documented.

Digital technology introduces another possibility: **recording**.

A village singer can record a performance using a mobile phone. The recording can then be:

- stored;
- copied;
- sent through messaging applications;
- uploaded to social media;
- incorporated into digital archives;
- shared with researchers;
- accessed by younger generations.

This can strengthen cultural preservation.

At the same time, recording changes the nature of the performance. An oral performance is usually dynamic and context-specific. A digital recording converts that temporary performance into a relatively stable cultural object.

The song consequently moves from:

performance → memory

to:

performance → recording → archive → circulation

This transformation can protect traditions from complete disappearance, but it can also alter the way communities perceive them.

Folk Dance and Digital Visibility

Odisha possesses a diverse range of folk and traditional performance traditions. Many of these performances have historically been associated with particular festivals, communities, occupations or localities.

Digital video has transformed their visibility.

Previously, a folk dance might have been witnessed mainly by people living in the village or surrounding area. Today, a performance can potentially reach audiences far beyond its original cultural setting.

This creates several opportunities.

First, digital platforms can increase public awareness of lesser-known traditions.

Second, young performers can gain opportunities to showcase their skills.

Third, researchers and cultural institutions can document performances.

Fourth, members of the diaspora can maintain connections with local traditions.

Fifth, digital documentation can contribute to cultural preservation.

However, visibility also creates challenges. When a performance is removed from its original ritual or social context and presented primarily as entertainment, its cultural meaning may become simplified. A complex community tradition may be reduced to a short digital clip.

Therefore, digital visibility and cultural understanding are not necessarily identical.

Transformation of Storytelling

Storytelling has traditionally occupied an important place in rural cultural life.

Stories about:

- local heroes;
- village deities;
- ancestors;

- supernatural beings;
- moral behaviour;
- historical events;
- animals;
- nature;
- social relationships

were commonly communicated orally.

The digital environment is creating new forms of storytelling.

Traditional stories may now appear as:

- recorded interviews;
- short videos;
- podcasts;
- digital illustrations;
- social-media posts;
- animated narratives;
- online articles;
- digital documentaries.

This creates a new relationship between memory and media.

An elderly storyteller who might previously have shared knowledge with only a small group can potentially reach a much larger audience through digital recording.

However, oral storytelling is more than verbal content. Gesture, voice, location, audience interaction and emotional expression are also important. A short digital recording may preserve the words while losing some of the social context.

Consequently, digital documentation should ideally preserve not only the story but also information about the storyteller, community, occasion, language, performance context and cultural significance.

Digital Transformation of Traditional Festivals

Festivals are central to village culture because they bring together multiple dimensions of community life.

A traditional festival can involve:

ritual + music + dance + food + dress + decoration + social interaction + local economy + collective memory

Digital technology has added another layer:

documentation + promotion + virtual participation + digital communication

Village festivals can now be announced through social media. Photographs can be circulated immediately. Performances can be livestreamed or recorded. Families living elsewhere can follow events remotely.

This has become especially significant for communities experiencing migration.

A person living in Bhubaneswar, Cuttack, Mumbai, Delhi or another city may remain connected to a village festival through digital media.

Digital technology therefore contributes to a new form of translocal cultural participation.

The village remains the physical centre of the festival, but its cultural audience can become geographically dispersed.

Women and Digital Cultural Transmission

Women have historically played major roles in maintaining many forms of domestic and community culture.

Traditional knowledge transmitted through women may include:

- marriage songs;
- lullabies;
- ritual songs;
- food preparation;
- traditional embroidery;
- decorative practices;
- Jhoti and Chita;
- seasonal customs;
- household rituals;
- oral narratives.

Digital technology creates new possibilities for documenting these practices.

A woman can record a traditional song or demonstrate a craft technique using a smartphone. Such documentation can make women's cultural contributions more visible.

Digital media can also challenge the assumption that cultural knowledge exists only in formal institutions or among recognised performers.

The household itself can become a site of digital cultural production.

At the same time, digital access is not automatically equal. Differences in education, income, language, digital literacy, device ownership and household

decision-making can influence who is able to produce and circulate cultural content.

Thus, the study of digital rural culture must include the question of who has access to cultural visibility.

Youth and the Transformation of Cultural Identity

Young people occupy a central position in the transition from oral to digital culture.

For earlier generations, cultural knowledge was often received directly from elders. Contemporary rural youth encounter culture through multiple sources:

family + school + village + television + smartphone + social media + digital platforms

This creates a more complex cultural identity.

A young person may simultaneously participate in a traditional village festival and consume global popular culture through digital platforms.

This does not necessarily indicate cultural rejection.

Instead, it can produce hybrid cultural identities.

For example, a traditional song may be recorded with contemporary audiovisual techniques. A folk dance may be presented using modern stage design. Traditional motifs may appear in digital graphics. Folk stories may be adapted into short videos.

Thus, youth may become not merely consumers but also reinterpretive agents of tradition.

Social Media and Cultural Circulation

Social media has transformed the speed at which cultural materials circulate.

Earlier, cultural transmission was largely local and gradual. Digital circulation can be immediate and geographically extensive.

A cultural practice can move through the following stages:

Local performance → Mobile recording → Social media upload → Digital circulation → Wider recognition

This process can create new cultural networks.

Artists may connect with audiences outside their villages. Cultural organisations can promote events. Researchers can discover previously undocumented traditions. Young people can learn about cultural

practices that may not be regularly performed in their own locality.

However, social media also encourages short-form content. Complex cultural practices may be compressed into brief videos because digital platforms often reward quick consumption.

This can encourage a distinction between:

culture as lived experience

and

culture as digital content.

The two should not be treated as identical.

Traditional Crafts and Digital Markets

Digital culture has implications beyond performance and communication. It can also influence rural economic practices.

Traditional crafts such as weaving, painting, bamboo work, palm-leaf craft, terracotta, woodwork and other forms of handicraft can potentially reach consumers through digital platforms.

This creates possibilities for:

- direct marketing;
- online promotion;
- digital catalogues;
- wider consumer networks;
- artisan visibility;
- reduction of geographical barriers.

Digital platforms can therefore connect cultural production with new economic opportunities.

However, increased commercialisation can also change cultural production. Artisans may modify designs according to market demand. Traditional motifs may be altered for commercial preferences. The distinction between cultural expression and market product can consequently become less clear.

The challenge is therefore to develop models where economic sustainability does not require the complete abandonment of cultural identity.

Traditional Knowledge and Digital Documentation

Rural Odisha possesses extensive traditional knowledge related to agriculture, food, ecology, medicinal plants, weather, architecture and resource management.

Much of this knowledge has historically been transmitted orally.

Digital documentation can contribute to its preservation.

For example, researchers can record:

- interviews with knowledge holders;
- traditional agricultural techniques;
- seed preservation practices;
- local food traditions;
- ecological knowledge;
- medicinal plant knowledge;
- traditional construction techniques.

Such documentation can create valuable cultural archives.

However, ethical considerations are essential. Traditional knowledge belongs to communities and should not automatically be treated as freely exploitable information. Documentation should therefore involve informed participation, appropriate attribution and sensitivity to community ownership. Digital preservation should not become digital extraction.

. Oral Memory and Digital Memory

The transition from oral to digital culture involves a transformation in the nature of memory itself.

Oral memory is:

- collective;
- performative;
- flexible;
- contextual;
- interpersonal.

Digital memory is:

- recorded;
- reproducible;
- searchable;
- transferable;
- potentially permanent;
- widely distributable.

Neither form is inherently superior.

Oral memory allows traditions to adapt. Digital memory allows traditions to be documented and circulated.

The most productive approach may therefore be to understand them as complementary systems.

A useful cultural model can be represented as:

Oral Tradition → Documentation → Digital Preservation → Community Access → Intergenerational Transmission

The objective should not be to replace oral culture with digital technology but to use digital technology to strengthen cultural continuity.

Authenticity and Cultural Transformation

One of the most important theoretical questions concerns authenticity.

What happens when a village performance is adapted for a digital audience?

Does it remain traditional?

There is no simple answer.

Culture has always changed. Folk traditions have incorporated new instruments, new themes, new performance spaces and new audiences. Digital technology is another factor in this continuing process.

Authenticity should therefore not necessarily be understood as complete resistance to change.

Instead, cultural authenticity can be considered in relation to:

- community recognition;
- continuity of cultural meaning;
- participation of tradition bearers;
- relationship with cultural context;
- transmission of core values;
- continuity of practice.

A digitally recorded tradition can remain culturally meaningful if the community continues to recognise and practise it.

Commercialisation and Commodification

Digitisation can increase the economic value of cultural traditions.

A popular digital video may attract attention to a particular folk performance. A craft can become commercially successful through online promotion. A festival can attract visitors after receiving digital publicity.

Yet commercialisation may produce commodification.

A cultural practice may increasingly be performed because it is marketable rather than because it has community significance.

This creates a tension between:

culture as community heritage
and
culture as marketable content.

The solution is not necessarily to reject commercialisation. Economic sustainability can help cultural traditions survive. Instead, communities and cultural institutions need mechanisms that ensure commercial use does not erase cultural ownership or reduce complex traditions to stereotypes.

Digital Divide and Cultural Inequality

Digital transformation is not uniform across rural Odisha.

Connectivity, affordability, digital literacy and access to devices vary between communities and regions.

Odisha's official planning documents have recognised the continuing need to improve internet connectivity and digital literacy, including among rural populations. The state's long-term vision also identifies digitalisation as a factor in rural transformation. This means that some communities can participate actively in digital cultural production while others remain primarily dependent on oral transmission.

The digital divide can therefore become a cultural divide.

Communities with better connectivity may gain greater cultural visibility, while less connected communities may remain underrepresented in digital archives and public discourse.

Digital heritage programmes should consequently prioritise marginalised, remote and under-documented communities.

Language and Digital Culture

Language is another important dimension of digital transformation.

Many rural cultural traditions are expressed through local varieties of Odia and community-specific linguistic forms. When cultural content moves into digital environments, it may be translated, standardised or modified for wider audiences.

This can increase accessibility but may also weaken linguistic diversity.

Local vocabulary, idioms, pronunciation and oral expressions may disappear when traditional material is rewritten in standardised forms.

Digital cultural preservation should therefore document the original language of performance wherever possible.

Audio and video are particularly valuable because they preserve pronunciation, rhythm, tone and linguistic expression that written transcription alone cannot capture.

Digital Culture and Cultural Memory

Digital technology has created an unprecedented possibility for rural communities to preserve their cultural memories.

A village could potentially develop a community archive containing:

- old photographs;
- oral histories;
- folk songs;
- festival recordings;
- biographies of artists;
- traditional recipes;
- craft demonstrations;
- local histories;
- agricultural knowledge;
- ritual practices.

Such an archive could become a cultural resource for schools, researchers, cultural organisations and future generations.

Importantly, digital archives should not exist only outside the community. Wherever possible, communities themselves should participate in deciding:

- what should be recorded;
- what should remain private;
- who can access it;
- how it should be described;
- how cultural ownership should be acknowledged.

This approach would shift digital preservation from external documentation to community-centred heritage management.

Opportunities for Cultural Preservation

The digital transformation nevertheless provides significant opportunities.

A coordinated rural cultural documentation programme could establish Village Digital Cultural Archives.

Such archives could contain:

1. Oral histories
2. Folk songs
3. Traditional dances
4. Local festivals
5. Village histories
6. Traditional crafts
7. Food traditions
8. Agricultural knowledge
9. Indigenous ecological knowledge
10. Photographic collections
11. Interviews with cultural practitioners
12. Local-language recordings

Schools and colleges could participate by documenting the cultural heritage of surrounding villages.

Young people could be trained as community cultural documenters.

This would create a productive relationship between generations:

Elders provide cultural knowledge → Youth provide digital skills → Community owns the archive

Such a model could transform the digital revolution into a mechanism of cultural continuity.

Theoretical Interpretation

The transition from oral to digital culture can be interpreted through the concept of cultural hybridity. Contemporary rural culture is increasingly produced through interactions between inherited traditions and new technologies.

It can also be understood through the concept of mediation. Digital technology does not merely transmit culture; it shapes how culture is presented, interpreted and consumed.

The concept of collective memory is equally relevant. Digital recordings can supplement human memory by providing new repositories of cultural remembrance.

Finally, the idea of living heritage is particularly useful. Heritage should not be treated as something

frozen in the past. It remains meaningful when communities continue to practise, interpret and transmit it.

From this perspective, the movement from oral to digital culture represents not simply a technological shift but a transformation in the social ecology of cultural transmission.

Findings and Discussion

The study suggests that rural Odisha is experiencing a transition from predominantly oral cultural transmission towards a mixed oral-digital cultural system.

Traditional forms have not simply disappeared. Instead, several patterns are emerging.

First, some traditions continue to be transmitted orally within families and communities.

Second, many practices are increasingly being documented digitally.

Third, digital platforms are expanding the geographical reach of village culture.

Fourth, younger generations are becoming important mediators between traditional knowledge and digital technology.

Fifth, cultural practices are being modified to suit new audiences and media formats.

Sixth, digital technology is creating opportunities for cultural entrepreneurship.

Seventh, unequal access to digital infrastructure may produce new forms of cultural inequality.

The transformation can therefore be conceptualised as:

Oral Culture → Digital Documentation → Digital Circulation → Cultural Adaptation → Hybrid Cultural Practice

This process is neither complete nor uniform. Different villages and communities experience it differently.

Conclusion

The transition from oral tradition to digital culture represents one of the most significant transformations taking place within contemporary rural Odisha. For generations, village culture was sustained through interpersonal relationships, memory, ritual participation, storytelling, folk

performance and everyday practice. The village itself functioned as a cultural classroom where knowledge was acquired through participation and passed from one generation to another.

Digital technology has introduced a new cultural environment. Smartphones, internet connectivity, social media and digital platforms have changed the speed, scale and form of cultural communication. Odisha's expanding telecommunications infrastructure provides an important technological foundation for this transformation.

Yet the emergence of digital culture should not be interpreted simply as the decline of traditional culture. The relationship is more complex. Digital technology can document endangered traditions, connect generations, provide visibility to rural artists, support craft economies and make local cultural knowledge accessible to wider audiences. At the same time, it can remove cultural practices from their original contexts, encourage commercialisation, simplify complex traditions and create new inequalities in cultural representation.

The most appropriate approach is therefore not to oppose tradition and technology but to develop a dialogue between them.

The future of rural cultural preservation may lie in a model where oral knowledge remains the foundation, community participation remains the authority, and digital technology becomes an instrument of documentation, transmission and revitalisation.

The ultimate objective should not be to convert village culture entirely into digital content. Rather, digital technology should help ensure that the living traditions of rural Odisha remain meaningful to the communities that created them while becoming accessible to future generations.

Thus, the movement from oral tradition to digital culture should be understood not as a journey from tradition to modernity, but as a continuing process from inherited memory to mediated memory, from local cultural spaces to connected cultural networks, and from traditional transmission to a new hybrid form of cultural continuity.

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