

# Preserving Indian Cultural Diversity: Revitalizing Indigenous Approaches to Deafness

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**Abstract** – Rich cultural heritage of India includes diverse indigenous practices that have historically addressed various aspects of life, including disability. This paper examines how revitalizing these practices, particularly those related to deafness, contributes to preserving India's cultural diversity. The focus is on the potential of these traditions to promote inclusivity within the deaf community, emphasizing the importance of integrating cultural diversity preservation with modern practices. The paper also discusses the implications of this revitalization for broader societal inclusion.

**Keywords** - *Indian Cultural Diversity, Deafness, Indigenous Practices, Inclusivity, Preservation*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

India, with its diverse cultural heritage, is home to a multitude of indigenous communities, each with unique customs, traditions, and languages. These communities include those with a long history of dealing with deafness (Ladd, P., 2003). However, the encroachment of modern, often Western, medical practices has led to the marginalization of these traditional methods. This paper aims to explore how preserving and revitalizing indigenous practices related to deafness can contribute to maintaining India's cultural diversity while promoting inclusivity within the deaf community.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature on cultural preservation in India underscores the importance of indigenous practices in maintaining the nation's cultural fabric. Historically, India's approach to disability, including deafness, was deeply rooted in its cultural and religious traditions.

For example, Usha Bhatt (1963) highlights how the Todas, a tribe from the Andaman Islands, practiced compassionate care for individuals with disabilities, integrating them into the community rather than ostracizing them. This approach contrasts sharply with the Western medical model, which often pathologizes disability.

Bhatt noted that ancient Indian texts, including the laws of Manu and epics like the Mahabharata, promoted a benevolent attitude toward disabled individuals. For instance, the Mahabharata portrays Dhritarashtra, a blind king, with empathy and respect (Bhatt, 1963). The reinterpretation of these practices during the colonial era, as discussed by historians like David Arnold (1993) and Frédérique Apffel-Marglin (1990), led to the adoption of Western notions of disease and disability, marginalizing traditional Indian perspectives. This shift had significant implications for how disabilities, including deafness, were understood and addressed in India.

In ancient India, the welfare of disabled individuals was primarily the responsibility of the State, the joint family, and the caste system, ensuring that those in need were cared for within the community. Buddhism later played a significant role in fostering a more accepting attitude towards the disabled, emphasizing virtues such as mercy, charity, and non-violence. During the reign of Chandragupta Maurya, early forms of vocational rehabilitation were introduced for those who were physically, socially, and economically disadvantaged, reflecting a progressive approach to disability (Bhatt, 1963).

Anita Ghai's analysis adds another dimension by discussing figures like Surdas, a blind poet, and Ashtavakra, known for his physical deformities, who resisted the persecution of disabled individuals. These figures were revered as children of God, symbolizing inherent rights and dignity for the disabled (Ghai, 2015).

The concept of karma also played a role in shaping attitudes towards disability in India, where disabilities were often seen as the result of actions in previous lives. However, this perception began to shift in 2015 when the Indian Prime Minister proposed renaming "Vikalang" (disabled) to "Divyang" (divine-bodied), in an effort to remove the stigma associated with disability and challenge the belief that disabilities were curses linked to karma (Ghai, 2015).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This paper is conceptual in nature, based on an extensive review of secondary sources. The authors observed a significant dearth of available literature on the intersections of cultural preservation and disability, especially concerning deafness, both in India and globally. Despite rigorous efforts to search and locate relevant articles, dissertations, thesis, documents, and reports, the available literature on this topic remains limited.

The inclusion criteria for the sources were their direct relevance to the themes of cultural preservation and disability, with a primary focus on deafness. Initially, 17 sources were identified, but after a thorough evaluation, only 12 were considered suitable for review. Of these, 4 included historical texts, anthropological studies, and contemporary analyses of cultural practices related to deafness in India, while the remaining 8 were international reviews focused on deafness as a disability.

## 4. RESULTS & ANALYSIS

The revitalization of Indian Sign Languages (ISL) and traditional practices related to deafness highlights a crucial intersection of cultural preservation and inclusivity in India. This analysis explores the significant strides made in integrating deaf individuals into various societal dimensions while preserving their cultural heritage. By examining the roles of education, community support, and the exploration of alternate techniques, this section outlines how these efforts contribute to a more inclusive and culturally rich society. The results are categorized into key themes, each of which delves into specific aspects of the broader objective to enhance inclusivity and cultural preservation.

### I. Indian Sign Languages and Cultural Preservation

- **Revival of ISL:** The revival of Indian Sign Languages (ISL) is at the forefront of efforts to preserve the cultural diversity of India. The establishment of the Indian Sign Language Research & Training Center (ISLRTC) has been instrumental in standardizing and promoting ISL across the country. This institution plays a crucial role in documenting the various regional variations of ISL, ensuring that these unique linguistic forms are not lost. The inclusion of ISL in the academic curricula under the New Education Policy 2020 represents a significant step toward normalizing the use of sign language in educational settings, thereby reinforcing its status as an integral part of India’s linguistic heritage. These initiatives not only preserve the language but also foster a sense of pride and identity within the deaf community, contributing to the broader cultural landscape of the nation.
- **Academic Integration:** The integration of ISL into the academic framework has profound implications for both cultural preservation and education. By embedding ISL in the curriculum, educational institutions are actively participating in the preservation of this linguistic heritage. This move also promotes greater understanding and acceptance of sign language among hearing students, breaking down barriers and fostering inclusivity from a young age. Moreover, the academic recognition of ISL encourages research and development in this field, paving the way for further advancements in sign language education and its applications. This integration serves as a bridge between traditional knowledge and modern education, ensuring that ISL remains a living, evolving language that continues to play a vital role in the cultural fabric of India.

### II. Inclusive Educational and Cultural Integration

- **Transition to Inclusive Education:** A pivotal shift is occurring in the Indian education system, moving away from segregated institutions for deaf students towards more inclusive settings where deaf and hearing students can learn side by side. This transition is not just about physical proximity but about fostering a learning environment where mutual respect and understanding can flourish. Inclusive education allows deaf students to interact with their hearing peers, providing opportunities for social integration that are crucial for developing empathy and breaking down stereotypes. By learning together, students from different backgrounds can appreciate each other's strengths and perspectives, leading to a more cohesive and inclusive society. This approach also ensures that deaf students do not lose touch with their cultural roots, as they are encouraged to express their identities within a supportive and understanding community.

- **Social Connections and Cultural Exchange:** Inclusive education does more than just provide a shared learning space; it facilitates meaningful social connections between deaf and hearing individuals. These interactions are essential for cultural exchange, where students can learn from each other's experiences and perspectives. Through shared activities, collaborative projects, and open dialogues, inclusive education fosters a deeper understanding of diversity and the importance of inclusivity. It also helps hearing students become more aware of the challenges faced by their deaf peers, promoting a culture of empathy and support. This environment not only benefits the students but also enriches the broader community by encouraging the acceptance and celebration of cultural diversity.

### III. Revitalization of Traditional Practices

- **Inclusion in Cultural Events:** The revitalization of traditional practices includes the deliberate effort to incorporate deaf individuals into cultural events and festivals. Organizers of these events are increasingly recognizing the importance of accessibility and are taking steps to ensure that deaf participants can fully engage in the celebrations. This includes the use of Indian Sign Languages, visual arts, and other forms of communication that are accessible to the deaf community. By making these events inclusive, India reaffirms its commitment to cultural diversity and ensures that all citizens, regardless of their hearing abilities, can partake in the rich cultural traditions of the nation. This inclusion also serves to educate the broader public about the contributions of the deaf community to India's cultural heritage, fostering a more inclusive and appreciative society.
- **Preservation of Indigenous Knowledge:** Traditional practices related to deafness are often steeped in indigenous knowledge, including unique sign languages and healing practices that have been passed down through generations. The revitalization of these practices is crucial for preserving this knowledge, which is an integral part of India's cultural identity. By documenting and promoting these traditional practices, India ensures that this valuable knowledge is not lost to modernization. This preservation effort also highlights the wisdom embedded in traditional approaches to deafness, offering alternative perspectives that complement modern medical and educational interventions. By valuing and maintaining these traditions, India contributes to a richer, more diverse cultural landscape that honors its historical roots while embracing contemporary advancements.

### IV. Community Support and Inclusivity

- **Role Local Communities:** Local communities play a pivotal role in the support and inclusion of deaf individuals. These communities are often the first line of support, offering resources and opportunities for education, employment, and social engagement. The involvement of local communities is essential for creating an inclusive environment where deaf individuals feel supported and valued. Traditional community structures, which emphasize collective responsibility, are being revitalized to provide a more inclusive support system. This approach not only benefits the deaf community but also strengthens the social fabric of the community as a whole, fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose.
- **Revitalization of Traditional Support Structures:** The revival of traditional support structures is key to ensuring that deaf individuals are not isolated or marginalized. These structures, which often involve extended family networks and community groups, provide a strong support system that caters to the specific needs of deaf individuals. By embracing these traditional forms of support, communities can offer more personalized and culturally relevant assistance, enhancing the well-

being of deaf individuals and ensuring their full integration into society. This revitalization also underscores the importance of community in preserving cultural values and traditions, which are essential for maintaining a strong and cohesive society.

## V. Promoting Holistic Approaches

- **Shift from Medical Model to Holistic Approaches:** There is a growing recognition of the need to move beyond the medical model of deafness, which primarily focuses on medical interventions, to a more holistic approach that addresses the emotional, social, and spiritual well-being of deaf individuals. This holistic perspective recognizes that deafness is not just a medical condition but a unique way of experiencing the world. By integrating traditional healing practices with modern healthcare, holistic approaches provide a more comprehensive understanding of deafness, one that respects and incorporates cultural and spiritual dimensions. This shift is particularly important in a culturally diverse country like India, where traditional practices play a significant role in the lives of many people.
- **Cultural and Spiritual Connections:** Holistic approaches to deafness emphasize the importance of cultural and spiritual connections, which are often overlooked in the medical model. These connections are vital for the overall well-being of deaf individuals, as they provide a sense of identity and belonging. By recognizing and nurturing these connections, holistic approaches contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage while promoting the health and well-being of the deaf community. This approach not only benefits deaf individuals but also enriches society as a whole by fostering a deeper understanding of the cultural and spiritual dimensions of deafness.

## 5. FUTURE SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The future scope of this study lies in exploring how the integration of indigenous practices with modern approaches can further enhance the preservation of India's cultural diversity. Research could focus on the practical applications of these practices in contemporary settings and their potential to foster greater inclusivity and empowerment within the deaf community. Additionally, future studies could examine the broader societal impacts of these practices, contributing to a more cohesive and culturally integrated society.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Preserving India's cultural diversity by revitalizing indigenous practices related to deafness is essential for fostering a more inclusive society. These practices not only honor India's rich cultural heritage but also promote a comprehensive understanding of disability that integrates cultural, social, and spiritual dimensions. As India faces the challenges of modernity, the wisdom from its past provides valuable insights for building a future that celebrates diversity and inclusivity.

The integration of individuals with hearing impairments into society can yield significant benefits across social, economic, and cultural domains. Key implications of such integration include:

- I. **Social Inclusion:** Embracing alternative communication techniques fosters social inclusion by bridging the gap between deaf and hearing individuals. A society that is more accommodating of

diverse communication methods allows deaf individuals to actively engage in social interactions, build meaningful relationships, and feel valued within their communities.

- II. **Access to Education:** Inclusive educational practices ensure that deaf individuals receive quality education on par with their hearing peers. By offering appropriate accommodations, educational institutions can empower deaf students to excel academically and pursue fulfilling careers, enhancing their overall integration into the workforce.
- III. **Economic Empowerment:** Better integration of individuals with hearing impairments into society enables them to contribute actively to the economy. Inclusive hiring practices and workplace accommodations can unlock the potential of deaf employees, leading to a more diverse and productive workforce.
- IV. **Cultural Awareness and Appreciation:** Valuing the cultural diversity of the deaf community enriches society's understanding and appreciation of different linguistic and cultural expressions. This increased cultural awareness fosters empathy, respect, and a broader sense of belonging.
- V. **Enhanced Civic Engagement:** As deaf individuals become more integrated into society, their voices and perspectives gain prominence in civic and public life. They can participate actively in community decision-making, advocacy, and political activities, contributing to a more inclusive and democratic society.
- VI. **Technological Advancements:** The integration of deaf individuals encourages the development of innovative technologies that support their communication needs. These advancements not only benefit the deaf community but also lead to more inclusive products and services that enhance society as a whole.
- VII. **Strengthened Family and Community Bonds:** Integrating deaf individuals into society fosters stronger family and community bonds. By understanding and accommodating the needs of deaf members, families and communities become more cohesive and supportive.
- VIII. **Reduced Stigma and Discrimination:** Inclusive practices help reduce stigma and discrimination against individuals with hearing impairments. A more inclusive society challenges negative stereotypes and promotes a culture of acceptance and respect for all.

In conclusion, the full integration of individuals with hearing impairments is crucial for creating a more inclusive, equitable, and compassionate society. Embracing alternative methodologies, inclusive education, accessible technologies, and cultural appreciation can break down barriers and promote social, economic, and cultural integration. By recognizing and celebrating the unique contributions of the deaf community, India can move toward a future where every individual is valued, respected, and provided with equal opportunities to thrive and participate fully in all aspects of life.

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