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Culture, Community & Change: A Study on Vanraji

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Abstract

The Raji in India is one of the Particularly Vulnerable tribe groups (PVTGs) whose heritage is rich in terms of cultural heritage in the context of the indigenous knowledge systems, traditional livelihood and close interaction with the forest ecosystem. However, the rapid socio-economic growth, modernization, and development intrusions by the states have been creating the question of how they can preserve their culture. The provided work attempts to examine the cultural practices, social organizations, belief systems, and the general lifestyle of the Raji tribe people with the help of ethnography approach. The research captures the traditional practices regarding the kinship, livelihood systems, rituals, language and material culture and determines the cultural change and adaptation processes through the participant observation, in-depth interviews and informal group discussions. The findings show that although most of the traditional practices, subsistence based livelihood systems, indigenous ecological knowledge and rituals practices are still essential in provision of continuity of cultural practices, the foreign forces which consist of the integration of formal education integration into the markets, migrations and welfare schemes have significantly altered the system of social relations and values. The paper characterises the adaptive strategies employed by the community in their approach of negotiating between tradition and modernity and the mental capacity to hold on to the basic cultural aspects as the changes processes take place. The essay has brought out the applicability of culturally sensitive development policies, as well as community-based intervention to safeguard the identity of the natives and at the same time enable a socio-economic betterment. The current research becomes a nice contribution to the overall discussion around the issue of tribal identity and cultural sustainability within a context of sustainable development due to the detailed ethnographical research of the native population.

Keywords: Raji Tribe; Cultural Identity; Ethnography; Indigenous Communities; Tribal Culture; Social Change; Traditional Knowledge; Modernization; PVTGs; Cultural Preservation

Introduction
The Indian country is defined by a special richness of indigenous groups which in processes of centuries evolved socially, their culture and perception of the surrounding world in which nature and the local socio-historical realities remained close. Of such communities, the tribal ones play a significant role in the socio-cultural existence of the nation, and it is an influential example of knowledge, faith, and social structure. The forces of modernization, globalization and state led development have nevertheless transformed the primitive lifestyles of majority of the tribal communities much to the danger of cultural identity of the tribes. In such ways, the ethnographic approach to the study of tribal societies becomes significant not only to be able to understand the cultural richness of a certain tribal society, but also the issues that the latter has to address when it comes to preserving their identity in the rapidly changing world. Raji tribe which is believed to be one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) of India is a compelling sample of how to investigate such aspect as cultural preservation and its effects on the socio-economic change.

It is also traditionally mentioned that the Raji tribe resides in the forest and has subsistence livelihood and intimate ecological knowledge. The community was dependent on hunting, gathering, shifting cultivation, and forest produce, and thus the cultural practices to which the community is closely interconnected with the natural landscapes are the product of the community. They are closely related to forest ecosystem as seen in their social set-ups, kinship systems, rituals, belief systems and material culture which has been the primary component of their identity and existence. The culture identity to Raji is not represented as such by the rites

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or festivals but rather a practice which is part of the day to day practice such as food habits, house pattern, oral tradition, language and pattern of social interaction. All these lead to the development of a common cultural system dividing the Raji, and the other social groups and enhancing the sense of belonging to the community.

Nevertheless, this has changed in the past few decades with the Raji tribal group/tribe getting more exposed to the rest of the outside influences as a by-product of developmental intervention, forest conservation policies, market integration, formal education, and welfare programs. Despite the fact that these initiatives were made with a socio-economic upliftment and inclusion measure, they have also resulted in high rate of transformations in the area of the utilization of the conventional livelihood and interpersonal relations. Restriction of entry over forests, substitution of subsistence production with wage production, and increased contact with non-tribal people have altered the monetary foundation of the people and the cultural practices. Therefore, local traditions and knowledge systems are being washed away gradually even among the young generations who are seeking their new dreams as a result of the influence of education, media influence, and city influence. These changes also have important issues of the sustainable tribal cultural identity in the midst of the modernization.

The concept of cultural identity vis-à-vis the tribal communities is not an immutable phenomenon but dynamic and changing phenomenon. It is a perpetual trade off between tradition and change where communities are selective in adapting to external forces and in doing so in seeking to uphold some of the cultural values. The applicability of their employability in this type of negotiation is evident in how the Raji tribe adapt their native ways of doing things to suit in the new socio-economic environment or integrate new modernities in the process, without forsaking the traditional ways. Such adaptive processes might only be understood by a critical and context-sensitive functioning which exceeds quantitative concentration on development and considers as an alternative, experiences, connotation, and social interaction amid the individuals. The methodological approach offered through ethnography and its feature of participant observation and qualitative inquiry offers a valid and reliable methodology on how to give a complete approach in the capture of these intricate aspects of the tribal life.

The current study assumes a case ethnographic design since it seeks to know how the Raji tribal community attempts to keep its cultural identity in spite of the socio-economic and cultural changes that are being experienced in the community. The research will not only attempt to make a record of the traditional practices, but will also analyze those forces of change on the practices, through the close interaction the research will have with the day-to-day life of the community, the social institutions, and the belief systems of the community. In this manner, it is possible to treat culture in totality as it is practiced and lived by the members of the community themselves as opposed to an abstract and forcefully articulated concept. In addition, the ethnographic research provides a platform through which the indigenous voices are brought to the limelight notwithstanding the fact that they are normally marginalized in mainstream development discourse.

This is an essential research as it contributes to the overall academic and policy-level discussion on tribal development and preservation of culture. Despite the economic measures such as the income, employment and access to the services, they do not portray the social as well as cultural dimensions of well being of the indigenous people. The cultural identity loss has extremely long-term consequences on the tribal culture, which may comprise the loss of knowledge, deterioration of social integrity, and the psychological disorientation of the population. This research would reflect on the fact that the culturally sensitive development policies that are participatory and taking into consideration the experience of the Raji community in which the value of the indigenous cultures is appreciated in addition to the material development.

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In conclusion, the ethnographic study of the Raji tribe community discloses part of the understanding in the complex relationship of cultural survival and social change. As their tribal societies continue to make ends meet in the modernization pressures, it has been observed that there is an imminent academic and social need to document their cultural realities and understand them. Hopefully, the present work will lead to the same balance of his work and give the interested audience an informative and sympathetic account of the cultural identity of Raji tribe and the issues and solutions of culture preservation in the modern world.

Literature Review

The academic interest has been directed towards the research of the Indian tribal communities later due to their peculiar socio cultural system, environmental knowledge and historical relegation. Existing literature also has valuable information on the topic concerning tribal identity, cultural resilient, health, education and the impact of the modernization and development policies with regards to these issues. However, strictly tribal Raji studies are few, scattered and fragmented. The existing review outlines the available literature in order to contextualize the current ethnographic research on the study of the Raji tribe, within the general academic discourse of the tribal studies, cultural conservation and socio-economic change in Uttarakhand and India.

The article of Alam and Jha (2018), bio-cultural analysis of tribal health and nutrition in Uttarakhand, is the source of one of the more specific empirical investigations of the Raji tribe. In their study, it lends weight to the threatened health situation, nutritional voids and vulnerability of the Raji people which credits the same to the changing food preferences, diminishing access to forest product and the ecological inversion. Despite the significance of the study in terms of assessing the biological and health-related facets of the life of the Raji, it is largely bioguided and does not provide a chance of immersing into the cultural identity, social institutions and at life practices through an ethnographic participation. The disparity is the reason why the studies on the basis of the holistic research taking into consideration the cultural, social, and economic factors are demanded.

Better ethnographic and sociological studies of the tribal societies in Uttarakhand would provide good structure of the setting. Bihan (2018) examines the social structure of the Jaunsari tribe, its customs and belief system in his study on the social organization of the tribe of how the traditional institutions continue to define the life of the people against the outside forces. Although the Jaunsari tribe is culturally different across the Raji, such a study gives some reflective insight into how tribal society is pushed towards continuity and change. Similarly, Singh (2019) gives socio-cultural description of various tribal groups existing in Uttarakhand indicating that each of them has numerous challenges such as marginalization, inability to access education, and loss of their culture. All these works result in the topicality of the ethnographic approach to the realities of tribal people.

Kandpal and Kumar (2024) in their article seek to understand the relationship of culture with the third aspect of modernization and resilience using the case of a tribe, Bhutia in Uttarakhand. Their findings show that tribal groups are not mere observers who receive the changes but they adjust to the external world not forgetting their cultural values that are fundamental in their culture. The specified perception, specifically, can be applied to the specified researcher, as cultural identity is perceived to be dynamic and in motion as opposed to a conventional tradition. Mishra (2022) also notes that the socio-economic and cultural vicissitudes of the Bhotia tribe are such that development interventions have led to a biased outcome, i.e. the developments have resulted in making the economic setting improved, but dismantling of the social structure of the tribe had taken place. These literatures advocate the importance of analyzing how to adapt and resilience in tribal life such as the Raji.

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Livelihood and economic transitions is another scholarly discipline. Discussing the case of tribal people and handloom in Uttarakhand, Kumar (2022) touches upon the problem of integrating into the market, losing the traditional jobs and the ineffectiveness of the institutions. The paper does not direct on Raji tribe however, it provides a clue on the broader structural constraints that face the life of tribal lives that are directly related to cultural identity. The loss concerning the traditional economic operations is at most times accompanied by the loss in cultural knowledge, practices and the social bonds strongly tied to the culture, therefore the problem is directly connected with the ethnographic research of cultural conservation.

Negi (2010) has also touched environment and ecological dimension of the tribe culture and indicated the role the traditional culture plays in preserving the biodiversity in Uttarakhand. The study demonstrates how the belief systems of the indigenous people and the practices mostly practiced by them contribute towards attaining a sustainable management of the resources. As a continuation of these, Phondani, Maikhuri, and Bisht (2013) suggest the importance of ethnomedicinal knowledge and the manner in which this perception is increasingly becoming extinct due to the alteration of socio-economic and cultural principles. Through such publications the fact that there is a natural bond between the culture of the tribe and environmental care is brought to the forefront, most notably when it comes to reliant communities like the Raji who depend more on forests.

There is a policy report and a government report that provides real macro-level approach towards tribal development. The census records on Scheduled Tribes offered by the Census of India (2021) give demographic data, including the small number of the PVTGs, and vulnerability, e.g., the Raji. A list of the welfare programs, education, and livelihood programs that have been provided to uplift the tribals is given in the Uttarakhand Tribal Development and Education Report (Government of Uttarakhand, 2021) and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs Annual Report (2022). Though the documents are dedicated to the inclusion and development, they were inclined to devote too much attention to the quantitative, at the cost of the cultural ones, which is why there is a need to conduct a qualitative ethnographic research. The training approaches such as the National Education Policy 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2020), the National Curriculum Framework 2022 (NCERT, 2022) and Reimagining Our Futures Together proposed by UNESCO (2021) address the cultural diversity, indigenous knowledge, and inclusivity but their implementation at the ground level is not explored in tribal contexts.

Finally, the cultural and heritage-related notion of Uttarakhand introduced by Sati (2024) is larger since, in this way, the cultures of tribes are placed in a context of the multicultural world of a state. This piece is adding to the thesis statement that the tribal heritage belongs to regional identity that must be captured and professionally maintained.

On balance, the literature review introduces areas of tribal existence to be essential such as health, livelihoods, education, culture, and resilience. However, the gap in the research on the subject of cultural identity and daily social life of the Raji tribe founded on the comprehensive ethnographic research is vivid. The given research endeavors to fill this gap and offer in detail ethnographic account of the Raji tribe group, both making a contribution to the scientific literature and teaching strategies of cultural sensitive development.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the socio-cultural practices of the Raji tribal community.
2. To study the social organization, kinship patterns, and family structure among the Raji.
3. To analyze livelihood patterns and traditional economic activities of the Raji community.

Research Methodology

The present study will use the qualitative ethnographic research approach to explore and understand the cultures of the Raji tribal community, their social structure, and their way of life. Ethnography was considered the appropriate approach since it will enable one see the life

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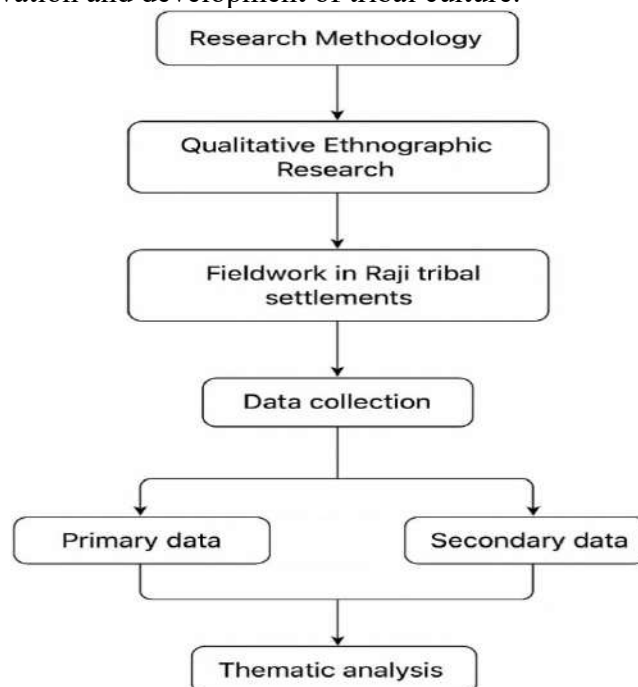
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of the indigenous in a more profound and holistic manner thanks to the focus on the experience lived, the social relations, and the meanings of the culture as held by the members of the community. The study was conducted in one sample Uttarakhand, tribal settlements of the Raji tribe; the sample was purposely chosen so as to bring diversity in the social and economic practice, in addition to being culturally representative.

The method of primary data collection involved using participant observation, in-depth interviews and informal group discussions. The researcher was allowed to spend time in the industry, consequently becoming accustomed to the routine, rituals, social interaction and living both, thereby providing an in depth contextual information. The cultural practices, the kinship systems and the processes of change were to be represented in the semi structured interviews with the community elders, women, youth as well as the key informants in order to capture the different aspects of the cultural practices. The casual discussion helped the spontaneous tales and mutual considerations particularly on issues regarding the tradition, modernization and retention of the identity. The secondary sources of data were used to fill in and hence place in context the original findings, government reports, census data, policy frameworks, and the available literature of other researchers.

The collected data was subjected to thematic analysis through which common patterns and themes that were correlated to socio-cultural practices, social organization, livelihood transitions and cultural adaptation were noted and deciphered. Ethics was an issue which was closely observed in the ethnographic research like informed consent, cultural sensitivity and anonymity of the respondents. The ethnographic technique thus made it easier to appreciate the Raji tribal group with subtlety and sympathy making the analysis both true to the Native perceptions and introducing the academic circles and debate on policy-related issues concerning the preservation and development of tribal culture.



Extract of objective 1

Socio-cultural dimension of the Raji tribe community portrays a traditional life that is communal besides being very close to the natural conditions. It is discovered the source of maintaining social order and continuity of culture is found in traditions which surround the kinship, marriage, and family structure, and systems of governance within the community. Rituals and festivals are not of the simple kind that ceremonies are but act as avenues of

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transmitting values, enhancing group identity and contributing to the flow of values as of the generations of oral traditions. Some of the practices that also reflect a distinct culture among the Raji people include food habits, type of housing pattern and styles of social interaction. In the meantime, this investigation indicates that these socio-cultural practices are slowly transforming due to the exposure of these practices to other social experiences, the market, and contacts with non-tribal people. All these developments notwithstanding, the Raji community is yet to give up a few cultural practices with the assistance of adaptive practices, the element of selective assimilation, and the participation in the traditional practices collectively. The traditions and shifts in the context of this active power show the strength of the community, along with the necessity to underline the importance of the social-cultural practices as the signals of the identity and means of social stability within the native community of the Raji tribe.

Extract of objective 2

The social structure, the form of kinship, and family structure of the Raji tribe contribute to the idea that the chiefs of this people have the community-based social structure, the interpersonal relations, and responsibilities are close. The Raji social structure is largely based on the relation of kinship where the family relation controls the roles and distribution of the resources among the members and also non-selfishness. We have the coincidence of extended and nuclear families, and families are fundamental to the social and economic structure. The kinship relations which are majorly under the customary norms and oral traditions shape marriage alliances, inheritance practices and social commitment and alternatively guarantees continuity of social order. The elderly and the seniors in the society are highly active in decision making and conflict resolutions and this adds more significance to age and experience respect. The research paper further explains that even because the traditional forms of the kinship and the families provide some form of belonging and stability in the social set up, there are slow changes that are occurring due to education, migration and opening up to the mainstream society. It is due to these pressures that the trend of smaller-size family and shifted patterns of authority are changing and basics of cooperation, living in communities besides family solidarity (based on kinship) have been constituents and constituents of the Raji.

Extract of objective 3

The discussion about livelihood pattern and economic activity of the traditional economical activities of the Raji people showed that the territorial possess a subsistence based economy that is historically founded on forest measurements and local ecological knowledge. The Raji traditionally had to use only hunting, gathering, shifting cultivation and collection of small forest produce which was not only the source of their survival, but also their culture and social life was determined by that. The seasonal shifts and communal work were intertwined such that these economic establishments were greatly interconnected with the aim of making the cooperation and collective responsibility stronger within a community. The paper has however stated that availability of resources such as forests, environmental policies, development of systems where there is market orientation have tremendously altered the livelihood pattern in the traditional way. Thus, a SWF of the Raji families in the period between 1995 and 2005 constituted a noticeable percentage of them switching slightly to the wage labor, agriculture, and government welfare program as a source of livelihood. Despite the realization of these changes, some aspects of the old economic practices are still preserved to date particularly in the use of indigenous knowledge in issues regarding the forest resources and techniques of sustenance practices. It is a characteristic of the adaptive response to the evolving socio-economic reality by the community, and it could be regarded as the precarity of the traditional livelihood, as well as the resilience of the Raji as the bargaining economic survivability and their struggle to maintain some aspects of their cultural and professional heritage.

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Discussion

The outcomes of the ongoing study in the ethnographic field reveal the notion that the cultural identity of the Raja tribe folks is constructed within the framework of convention, community, and livelihood, as well as foreign influences. The socio-cultural practices, social organization and kinship and patterns of livelihood are the main themes of the analysis which have been used in the discussion to value how the Raji community conducts the negotiations between cultural continuity and change in contemporary circumstances.

The presentation on the socio-cultural practices has unveiled that the driving forces of the Raji identity are the rituals, customs and the daily practices that the culture enforces. The practices are not only the methods of discovering the culture of distinctiveness but also the methods of promoting the social cohesion and transfer of the values of the indigenous to the following generations. Similar to the example of the Bhutia tribe as described by Kandpal and Kumar (2024), the Raji people are also culturally stable since they prefer the traditional values, but they remain adaptable to the changing social situations. However, the fact that oral cultures are slowly diminishing and that younger generations are increasingly marginal to the conventional activities is a pointer of the emerging shift in generation, which is an issue to overall sustainability of the culture in the long term. This will not contradict the prior results of a study by Alam and Jha (2018) who explained an increase in the socio-cultural change of the Raji as the extension of a lifestyle change and increased access to resources.

The relationships between the family and tribal organization of the Raji still has been the center of making the community stable and supportive towards one another. The power of traditional social institution is manifested in the significance of the kin-based networks and honor by the elders due to the influence of the social institutions of the past. The structures are the informal modes of ruling the conduct of the society conflict solution and decision-making. However, access to formal education that is on the increase, migration and wage-based labor is slowly altering the family units and authority patterns. The changes in the nuclear families and individualized economy can be observed as the tendencies in the tribal societies of Uttarakhand, which capture those transformations (Singh, 2019; Mishra, 2022). Despite the changes, the kinship ties continue to bring their relevance through the fact that it is adaptive to social and economic pressures.

Alteration of livelihoods emerges to organize the culture and social dealings within Raji community. Broadening patterns of the desertion of traditional forest based livelihood in favor of wage labour and dependence on state welfare is favourable as well as an indicator of structural shifts in the larger contexts including the conservation of forests and incorporation of markets. As much as this kind of transition has incorporated the material conditions of certain households to improve, it has compromised the culture of the native economic operations. This remark is compatible with the remark made by Negi (2010), Phondani et al. (2013) who believe that traditional ecological knowledge has been a victim of the socio-economic transformation. In the meantime, the fact that the community still uses indigenous skills and knowledge in as much as subsistence practices are concerned indicates the community resilience and adaptation processes.

The discussion also proposes the effect of the development policies and institutional interventions on cultural track of Raji community. Due to government welfare, education and development programs, basic services are becoming more available yet they do not take into consideration of cultural backgrounds and the contribution of individuals. Policy frameworks (the National Education Policy 2020 or the focus of the UNESCO on cultural diversity) help the integration of the indigenous knowledge systems, but the aspects of their implementation on the grassroots level are not yet developed. Something that the ethnographic information in this paper would tell us is that development initiatives, that do not take into consideration the

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cultural values would help in accelerating the process of cultural decolonization, rather than leading to inclusive development.

Overall, as it has been indicated in the discussion, cultural identity in the Raji tribe is not absolute, fixed either where it is being continuously re-created in daily life practices, social interactions as well as adjusting to new developments. The reality that the community has been able to weigh the traditional and modernity is a sign that there is a certain level of cultural resilience which should be valued and benevored. The study thus confirms the argument that sustainable tribal development can only be made through transformation to areas that it must no longer be pegged on economic aspects but rather cultural preservation needs to be an objective of the development agenda. This kind of research ethnography like the one in the current study is a worthy resource of information that is requested in providing information about culturally motivated policies that take into consideration the identities of the indigenous people but is sensitive to solving socio-economic concerns of the indigenous people such as the Raji.

Overall Conclusion

The available ethnographic studies on the Raji tribe people provide a general understanding of intricate play of the culture identity in relation to the social structure and means of livelihood through the contemporary socio economic change. The findings have clearly demonstrated the cultural identity of the Raji tribe to be inherent in their socio-cultural traditions, their social systems founded on kinship relations and native system of livelihood that have all historically ensured cohesiveness and existence of the communities. The tribe possesses a weak inclination of holding to the cultural basics and concurrently adapt to the social and economic changes, regardless of the fact that the tribe is already categorized as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group.

The study reveals that rituals, traditions, and daily activities constitute a significant area of socio-cultural beliefs of the Raji which protects a sense of belonging and identification with the group. These are informal methods of passing down culture and these make the values and social standards stronger between a generation. However, the erosion of traditional knowledge particularly in the youths is not fast occurring and thus is an indicator that there is a form of challenge when it comes to continuity of the culture in the face of foreign demands like formal education, media and exposure to mainstream societies. This reinforces the need to capture and to revive the native cultural practices.

The element of social structure and the pattern of sharing the kin is also paramount to the social interactions within the Raji society as it provides collective support and the security of its society and their system of unorganized rule. Although there are movement trends towards nuclear family structures and shift in the power distribution patterns, the kinship ties remain reassuring and supportive. These societal institutions exist and therefore emphasize on their flexibility in responding to modernization without complete failure of the old norms.

It is found that the concept of livelihood transitions becomes a turning point of the lapses of cultural change in the Raji community. Policies change and structural constraints can include replacement of subsistence industries like forest with the wage labor and welfare scheme. Even though the transitional changes have helped the accessibility of the basic needs, it has caused the erosion of the cultural values of the traditional economic activities and cultural knowledge about the ecology. This dual impact enhances the imbalanced imbalance development measures that uphold upliftment of the economy and its preservation of the culture.

Overall, the study is designed to come to the conclusion that the cultural identity of the Raji people is not fixed and fading away but rather dynamic and negotiable, as well. The developed adaptive mechanisms around its community are one of the factors that demonstrates that tradition and modernity may be combined together in the case of the culturally sensitive policy

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and the inclusion development strategies. Ethnographic research is significant in recording such realities that are equally experienced as also in providing a voice to the indigenous. Therefore, the research article is an ardent supporter of development intervention which values the cultural heritage as an aspect and parcel of tribal health and adjusts to ensure that socio-economic developments should not support at the cost of cultural annihilation.

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