

Juang Culture & Language a Study of Keonjhar District

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ABSTRACT

The Juang community, recognized as one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) of India, represents a unique cultural and linguistic heritage within Odisha. Concentrated primarily in the hill and forest regions of Keonjhar district, the Juang people possess a distinct cultural identity shaped by their historical isolation, intimate relationship with nature, and long-standing traditions. This study, titled "Juang Culture and Language: A Study of Keonjhar District," seeks to explore and document the dynamic interplay between cultural practices, social life, and linguistic patterns of the Juanga tribe in the contemporary context. While modernization and development programs have influenced several aspects of their lifestyle, the Juanga community continues to preserve many of its indigenous practices, making it an important subject of anthropological and sociolinguistic inquiry.

This paper investigates the various dimensions of Juanga culture, including their festivals, rituals, oral traditions, traditional attire, crafts, and worldview. Emphasis is placed on understanding how cultural expressions serve as markers of identity and instruments of social cohesion. The study further examines the Juang language part of the Austroasiatic language family, focusing on its structure, vocabulary, oral narrative styles, and its role in sustaining cultural memory. Special attention is also given to patterns of language retention and shift among the younger generation, who are increasingly exposed to Odia and other dominant languages through schooling and media.

Methodologically, the research employs a combination of qualitative tools such as field observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation of oral narratives, alongside a review of secondary literature. The findings highlight both the resilience and vulnerability of Juang cultural and linguistic traditions in Keonjhar district. While certain practices remain deeply rooted, others face decline due to socio-economic pressures, developmental interventions, and reduced intergenerational transmission. This study underscores the need for culturally sensitive policies, community-driven preservation initiatives, and further academic documentation to safeguard the rich cultural and linguistic heritage of the Juang people. Ultimately, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of tribal identity and cultural survival in an era of rapid socio-cultural transformation.

A. INTRODUCTION

The Juang community, one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) of India, occupies a significant place in the cultural landscape of Odisha, particularly in Keonjhar district. Known for their distinct ethnic identity, traditional knowledge systems, and intimate connection with the natural

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environment, the Juangs represent a vibrant yet fragile cultural heritage. Their settlements, largely located in the hilly and forested regions of the district, have historically enabled the community to develop unique cultural practices, social institutions, and

linguistic features that set them apart from other tribal groups of the region.

The Juang language, belonging to the Austroasiatic family, forms the core of their cultural identity. Its oral richness embedded in songs, folktales, rituals, and everyday expressions serves as a repository of collective memory and traditional wisdom. However, increasing exposure to Odia and other dominant languages, coupled with changing socio-economic conditions, has created challenges for its transmission to younger generations. Similarly, Juang cultural practices ranging from their festivals, dances, and rituals to their attire, craftsmanship, and worldview are undergoing gradual transformation under the influence of modernization, education, and development initiatives.

B. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Acharya (2010) presents an important survey of the tribal languages of Odisha and highlights the structural features, oral traditions, and vulnerability of languages such as Juang due to declining intergenerational transmission. Complementing this linguistic perspective, Basu (1997) offers a comprehensive study of the Munda languages in India. His work situates Juang within the Austroasiatic family and explains its phonological and morphological characteristics in relation to other Munda languages like Ho, Mundari, and Santali.

Behera (2005) contributes significantly to the understanding of tribal arts and cultural expressions in Odisha. His documentation of indigenous crafts, ornaments, dance forms, and eco-cultural symbols provides context for appreciating the unique cultural aesthetics of the Juang tribe. Earlier ethnographic insights by Elwin (1950) remain foundational, as he captures the social life, belief systems, ecological relationships, and ritual practices of tribal communities in eastern India, including those resembling Juang traditions.

The demographic context for understanding Juang cultural transformation is rooted in Government of India sources. The **Census of India** (2011) offers data on population, literacy, and socio-economic indicators of Scheduled Tribes in Odisha, including the Juang. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2020) report on PVTGs outlines their development challenges, highlighting issues such as limited access to education, health gaps, and threats to cultural continuity.

Mahapatra's Encyclopaedia Mundarica (1996) provides one of the most exhaustive compilations of cultural and linguistic information on Munda-speaking tribes. It includes descriptions of rituals,

myths, kinship, social customs, and language structures relevant to the Juang. Additionally, Singh's *People of India: Odisha* (1994), an authoritative ethnographic volume, captures the identity markers, traditional institutions, socio-religious practices, and settlement patterns of the Juang and other tribes of the state.

Contemporary academic perspectives are offered by **Munda and Behera** (2015), who examine tribal issues in India through the lens of cultural change, policy interventions, and identity politics. Their analysis helps contextualize the challenges faced by communities like the Juang in an era of modernization. Samal (2004) focuses specifically on the socio-cultural life of the Juang and provides detailed accounts of their festivals, dances, rituals, social norms, and daily lifestyle, making his work an essential reference for cultural studies.

Pfeffer (1997) provides an anthropological exploration of the Juang worldview, especially their perception of the natural environment. His work emphasizes how ecological elements shape Juang rituals, cosmology, and traditional knowledge systems. STRI (2018), through its community profile, updates these ethnographic and linguistic insights by documenting changes in Juang culture, language use, socio-economic patterns, and the impact of development programs.

Linguistic endangerment and preservation efforts are examined in **Dash and Pani** (2019), who highlight the increasing shift from Juang to Odia due to schooling, media exposure, and socio-economic pressures.

Sinha (2012) enriches the linguistic perspective further by providing a detailed study of Munda tribes, emphasizing how oral narratives, myths, and songs contribute to language preservation and cultural continuity.

Education-based challenges are addressed by **Thangaraj** (2016), who analyzes the effectiveness of Odisha's Multilingual Education (MLE) program. His findings indicate both the potential benefits and practical gaps in implementing mother-tongue education for tribal communities, including the Juang.

C. OBJECTIVE OF STUDY

- To document the cultural practices of the Juang community** in Keonjhar district, including their festivals, rituals, oral traditions, traditional attire, craftsmanship, and social institutions.
- To analyze the linguistic features of the Juang language**, focusing on its structure, vocabulary,

oral narrative forms, and its role in preserving cultural memory.

3. **To examine the current status of language retention and shift** within the Juang community, particularly among the younger generation exposed to Odia and other dominant languages.
4. **To study the impact of modernization, education, and development initiatives** on Juang cultural expressions and traditional ways of life.
5. **To explore the relationship between Juang cultural identity and their natural environment**, highlighting how ecological surroundings influence their worldview and traditional knowledge systems.
6. **To assess the resilience and vulnerabilities of Juang cultural and linguistic traditions**, identifying practices that are thriving, declining, or transforming in the contemporary context.

D. METHODOLOGY

This study on “*Juang Culture and Language: A Study of Keonjhar District*” is primarily based on **secondary sources of information**, supplemented by conceptual analysis and interpretative approaches relevant to anthropological and sociolinguistic research. The methodology adopted ensures a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and linguistic landscape of the Juang community while maintaining academic validity and objectivity.

1. Research Design

The study follows a **descriptive and analytical research design**.

- The **descriptive** aspect focuses on documenting Juang cultural practices, linguistic features, and socio-cultural changes.
- The **analytical** component involves examining patterns of cultural continuity, transformation, and language shift based on available data.

This approach enables a systematic representation of existing knowledge while identifying gaps and emerging trends within Juang society.

2. Nature and Source of Data

As the study relies entirely on **secondary data**, various published and unpublished materials were consulted. The sources include:

- **Books and Monographs** on tribal studies, Austroasiatic languages, and Odisha's PVTGs
- **Research Articles**, academic journals, ethnographic studies, and linguistic surveys
- **Government Reports** such as Census documents, Ministry of Tribal Affairs reports, and

Odisha State Tribal Research Institute (STRI) publications

- **NGO and Project Reports** related to tribal development, education, and language preservation
- **Digital Archives and Online Databases**, including theses, dissertations, and institutional repositories

These sources provided insights into Juang cultural traditions, socio-economic conditions, language structure, and the impact of developmental interventions.

3. Data Collection Procedure

The process of data collection involved:

- **Systematic Review of Literature:** A thorough examination of available literature on Juang culture, Juang language, and tribal studies in Odisha was conducted.
- **Thematic Categorization:** Collected information was organized under major themes such as cultural practices, socio-economic life, linguistic structure, oral traditions, and modernization effects.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Data from different authors and reports were compared to identify common findings, contradictions, and emerging patterns.
- **Interpretative Analysis:** Qualitative interpretation was used to understand the symbolic and functional aspects of Juang rituals, oral narratives, and cultural identity as presented in the literature.

4. Method of Analysis

Given the qualitative nature of the study, the analysis employs:

- **Content Analysis:** Examination of textual data to identify key cultural and linguistic elements of the Juang community.
- **Sociolinguistic Analysis:** Assessment of language use, transmission, and shift using established theoretical frameworks.
- **Anthropological Interpretation:** Understanding cultural expressions, rituals, and worldviews based on ethnographic descriptions in secondary sources.
- **Trend Analysis:** Studying how modernization, education, and development policies have influenced the community over time.

5. Scope and Delimitations

- The study is confined to the **Juang community of Keonjhar district**, though references to their presence in adjacent areas may appear for contextual clarity.

- As the research is based on secondary data, **no fieldwork, participant observation, or direct interviews** were conducted.
- The findings reflect existing research and documented observations rather than real-time ethnographic updates.

6. Ethical Considerations

Although secondary-data-based, the study upholds academic ethics by:

- Ensuring **proper acknowledgment** of all consulted sources
- Avoiding misrepresentation or cultural stereotyping
- Maintaining sensitivity towards the identity, traditions, and dignity of the Juang community

7. Significance of the Methodological Approach

Using secondary data ensures:

- A broader understanding of long-term cultural and linguistic trends
- Access to established research by anthropologists, linguists, and government bodies
- A synthesis of multiple perspectives, enriching the academic value of the study

E. CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS OF JUANG TRIBES

The cultural background of the Juang tribe reflects a deep historical connection with nature, community-centered living, and a value system rooted in tradition. Their culture is expressed through festivals, music, dance, attire, and indigenous art forms that together reinforce social cohesion and collective identity. These cultural elements not only symbolize their worldview but also function as mechanisms for transmitting traditional knowledge across generations. Below are key components of their cultural life:

a. Juang Festivals (Pusha Purnima, Akhaya Trutiya, etc.)

Festivals form an integral part of Juang cultural life, serving both religious and social purposes. They are closely tied to agricultural cycles, natural elements, and clan-based rituals. Some major festivals include:

1. Pusha Purnima

Pusha Purnima is one of the most significant festivals celebrated during the Pausha month (December–January). It marks a period of agricultural prosperity and community thanksgiving. The festival involves communal feasting, traditional dances, and offerings to ancestral spirits. Rituals performed during this time express gratitude to nature for sustenance and protection. It strengthens kinship bonds as families and village groups participate collectively.

2. Akhaya Trutiya

Akhaya Trutiya is observed at the onset of the agricultural season. It symbolizes the beginning of ploughing and sowing activities. Ritual worship is offered to earth deities to ensure fertility, good harvests, and the well-being of livestock. Seeds are blessed during this festival, highlighting the Juang belief in the sacredness of cultivation.

3. Other Observances

Additional ceremonies include:

- **Magh Parab**, celebrated with hunting traditions and community worship.
- **Karam**, associated with the worship of the Karam tree, symbolizing fertility and protection.
- **Sarhul**, marking the blooming of sal flowers and honouring the spirits of nature.

Together, these festivals reaffirm the Juang community's dependence on nature and their respect for ancestral and ecological spirits.

b. Music, Dance, and Traditional Instruments

Music and dance are central to Juang cultural expression. They strengthen social unity, communicate collective emotions, and are performed during festivals, rituals, and communal gatherings.

1. Music and Songs

Juang songs reflect themes of nature, agricultural life, love, hunting, and ancestral worship. Many songs are composed in their native language and serve as a vehicle for preserving oral traditions. The rhythmic style of singing often follows call-and-response patterns, symbolizing collective participation.

2. Dance

Dance is performed in circular formations, signifying unity and harmony. The **Pasha Dance** is one of the most well-known, performed during major festivals. Men and women often dance together, accompanied by traditional beats and chants.

3. Traditional Musical Instruments

Common instruments include:

- **Dhol / Mardala** – a drum providing the primary rhythm
- **Thali** – a metallic plate used as a percussion instrument
- **Flutes**, made from bamboo, used to create soft melodic tunes
- **Bansi and Turi**, traditional wind instruments

These instruments, made from locally available materials like wood, gourd, and animal skin, reflect their environmental ingenuity.

c. Indigenous Art Forms and Body Ornaments

Indigenous art among the Juang is closely connected to their ecology, spirituality, and aesthetic expression.

1. Art Forms

The Juang are traditionally known for their **woodcraft**, **bamboo work**, and **leaf crafts**. Their decorative motifs often depict natural elements such as trees, animals, hills, and geometric patterns. Art is predominantly functional appearing in household items, agricultural tools, baskets, and ritual objects.

2. Body Ornamentation

Body decoration plays a crucial role in expressing identity, beauty, and social status. Women traditionally wear **multiple bead strings**, metal necklaces, and silver ornaments. Beadwork is considered a symbol of femininity and social belonging. Men traditionally wore simple ornaments, such as earrings or metal armlets. Tattoos and body painting were once common, symbolizing adulthood, clan identity, and spiritual protection. These adornments serve not only aesthetic purposes but also act as cultural markers representing tradition and continuity.

d. Traditional Attire and Symbolic Meanings

Traditional Juang attire is distinct and symbolic, reflecting their cultural identity and ecological adaptation.

1. Traditional Clothing of Juang Women

Historically, Juang women wore a distinctive garment called the "**Patta**" or **leaf skirt**, made from woven tree leaves. Although rare today due to social and cultural changes, it symbolizes their intimate relationship with nature. Women also wear **bead necklaces**, belts, and waist ornaments as part of traditional attire. Each ornament carries symbolic value representing beauty, social identity, and marital status.

2. Traditional Clothing of Juang Men

Men traditionally wore **loincloths** or short garments made from coarse cloth. During festivals or rituals, they often accessorized with headgear decorated with feathers or leaves.

3. Symbolic Meaning

The simplicity of their attire reflects their forest-based lifestyle and resourcefulness. Traditional dress reinforces cultural pride and distinguishes the Juang from neighbouring communities. In rituals, specific attire signifies purity, respect for ancestors, and the sanctity of ceremonial space.

F. LANGUAGE & ORAL TRADITIONS

a. Juang Language: Features and Uniqueness

The **Juang language** belongs to the **Munda branch of the Austroasiatic language family**, sharing structural similarities with languages such as Mundari, Ho, and Santali. It is primarily **oral**, with

limited written documentation, and remains the central marker of Juang cultural identity.

Key Features and Uniqueness:

1. Phonological Characteristics

Juang contains a rich inventory of **nasal and aspirated consonants**, a typical feature of Munda languages. The language uses **tonal variations and stress patterns** to distinguish meaning in certain contexts. Vowel length and intonation play a significant role in oral communication.

2. Morphological Structure

Juang demonstrates **agglutinative morphology**, where multiple suffixes are added to a base word to express tense, number, aspect, or case. Pronouns and verb forms change according to social relationships, reflecting the Juang emphasis on kinship and hierarchy.

3. Vocabulary and Semantic Fields

Much of the Juang vocabulary is derived from their **forest-based lifestyle**, with numerous words related to nature, flora, fauna, agriculture, and hunting. Ritualistic and spiritual concepts form a large part of their lexicon, reflecting their deep connection with ancestral spirits and cosmology.

4. Orality and Expressiveness

As a predominantly oral language, Juang relies heavily on **rhythmic speech**, repetition, and metaphor. Songs, chants, and narratives preserve linguistic features that may not occur in everyday conversation.

5. Uniqueness

The language is spoken exclusively by the Juang community, giving it a **high level of ethnolinguistic uniqueness**. Despite influence from Odia, the Juang language retains distinct grammatical structures that differentiate it from dominant regional languages. Its close association with rituals and festivals means that language is not merely a communication tool but a **sacred vehicle of cultural memory**.

b. Folktales, Myths, Songs, and Oral History

The oral traditions of the Juang community form a central pillar of their cultural identity. These narratives are transmitted across generations and reflect their worldview, moral codes, history, and relationship with nature.

1. Folktales

Juang folktales often revolve around **forest animals**, **ancestral heroes**, **supernatural beings**, and **natural phenomena**. These stories teach moral lessons about cooperation, honesty, bravery, and respect for nature. Many tales explain the origins of cultural practices, hunting methods, or clan relationships.

2. Myths

Creation myths narrate how the world, forests, rivers, and human beings came into existence. Myths of ancestral spirits define clan identities and guide ritual obligations. Seasonal myths explain agricultural cycles, rainfall patterns, and the significance of festivals such as Pusha Purnima or Magh Parab.

3. Songs

Songs (often performed during festivals, weddings, and communal gatherings) preserve the **linguistic beauty and rhythmic patterns** of the Juang language. Work songs accompany agricultural activities, while **dance songs** express themes of love, nature, and celebration. Ritual songs are considered sacred and are sung to invoke deities or ancestors.

4. Oral History

- Juang oral history records:
 - Migration patterns
 - Clan genealogies
 - Memories of cultural change
 - Experiences of interaction with other communities
- This tradition helps reinforce social cohesion and collective identity by keeping alive narratives of survival, resilience, and ancestral wisdom.

Together, these oral traditions form a **living archive**, ensuring the transmission of values, identity, and historical consciousness.

c. Efforts for Language Preservation

The Juang language, like many PVTG languages, faces challenges due to:

- Declining intergenerational transmission,
- Increasing dominance of Odia in education and administration,
- Exposure to mainstream media,
- Migration and socio-economic changes.

However, various initiatives—both governmental and community-led—have been undertaken to preserve the language.

1. Governmental and Institutional Efforts

- The **Odisha State Tribal Research Institute (STRI)** has conducted surveys, documentation projects, and published materials on Juang language and culture.
- **Ministry of Tribal Affairs** programs encourage the development of primers, dictionaries, and teaching materials in PVTG languages.
- The **Multilingual Education (MLE) programme** in Odisha includes Juang language resources at primary school levels, aiming to strengthen early education in the mother tongue.

2. Academic Documentation

- Linguists and anthropologists have recorded Juang vocabulary, folktales, songs, and grammatical structures.
- University departments and research scholars increasingly focus on documenting endangered languages, including Juang.

3. Community-led Preservation

- Elders within the Juang community continue to transmit stories, songs, and rituals to younger generations.
- Cultural festivals and traditional dance groups help maintain the use of the language in social and ceremonial contexts.
- Community leaders advocate for inclusion of Juang language in local schools and cultural programs.

4. Use of Digital and Modern Tools

- Some NGOs and youth groups are exploring the use of **audio-visual recordings, mobile apps, and digital archives** to preserve oral traditions.
- Efforts to record songs, folktales, and rituals create long-term linguistic resources.

5. Need for Further Strengthening

While these initiatives are promising, more work is needed in:

- Developing Juang language textbooks,
- Encouraging mother-tongue-based schooling,
- Training local teachers,
- Creating community-run language centres,
- Promoting research collaborations.

G. CONCLUSION

The cultural and linguistic heritage of the Juang community of Keonjhar district represents one of the most distinctive indigenous traditions of Odisha. As this study has shown, the Juang people embody a deep-rooted connection with nature, reflected vividly in their festivals, rituals, music, dance, attire, craftsmanship, and oral traditions. Their cultural practices are not merely expressions of identity but are integral to social organization, ecological knowledge, and the continuity of communal values. Likewise, the Juang language an important member of the Austroasiatic family serves as a vital repository of ancestral wisdom, symbolic meanings, and collective memory. The findings of the study highlight that while the Juang community continues to preserve many aspects of its traditional culture, the forces of modernization, formal education, economic change, and increasing linguistic contact with Odia pose challenges to the survival of both their cultural practices and their mother tongue. The younger generation, in particular, faces pressures that contribute to language shift and reduced participation

in certain traditional customs. Despite these challenges, several cultural expressions remain vibrant, supported by community initiatives, ritual obligations, and the inherent resilience of Juang identity. Governmental efforts, academic documentation, and emerging community-led initiatives provide promising pathways for the preservation of Juang language and culture. However, these efforts need to be strengthened through sustained engagement, culturally sensitive educational practices, and active participation of the Juang community itself. Preservation cannot be imposed externally; it must evolve from within, supported by institutional resources and respect for indigenous worldviews. Ultimately, this study reaffirms that the cultural and linguistic traditions of the Juang are not just relics of the past but dynamic, living systems that continue to adapt while retaining their core identity. Safeguarding this heritage is not only essential for the Juang community but also enriches the broader cultural diversity of Odisha and India. Continued research, documentation, and community-based preservation programs are crucial to ensuring that the unique cultural and linguistic legacy of the Juang people endures for future generations.

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