

Folktales as Cultural Memory: Exploring Belief Systems of the Munda Tribe of Odisha Through Translation

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Abstract

The Munda community of Odisha preserves its world view, spiritual relationship with nature, and socio-cultural identity through an extensive body of oral folktales. These tales function as living archives of traditional knowledge, ritual practices, environmental ethics, and community norms. This research explores how selected Munda folktales, when translated into English, illuminate the cultural beliefs of the tribe while simultaneously revealing the challenges and responsibilities translation carries in representing indigenous epistemologies. The analysis particularly focuses on narratives that address cosmology, ancestor worship, gender roles, and harmonious coexistence with the natural environment. By combining folkloristic interpretation with translation studies, this paper argues that translation is not merely a linguistic act but a vital means of cultural mediation. It further reflects on how documenting and translating such stories contributes to their preservation in the face of cultural erosion brought by modernisation, migration, and dominant linguistic cultures. The paper concludes that translating Munda folktales into English enables wider academic engagement and global recognition, while also underscoring the urgency to maintain the integrity and contextual richness of indigenous traditions.

Keywords: Munda Tribe; Folktales; Cultural Memory; Oral Tradition; Indigenous Knowledge; Translation Studies; Odisha; Adivasi Literature; Belief Systems; Cultural Preservation

The Munda tribe, a prominent Adivasi community inhabiting regions of Odisha, Jharkhand, and adjoining states, is widely recognised for its profound cultural heritage and resilient oral traditions. Within the Munda community of Odisha, folktales play an essential role in conveying collective wisdom, traditional laws, and spiritual frameworks. These tales operate as cultural memory systems that preserve the knowledge and social values inherited from ancestors long before written literacy arrived in the community. They are not merely stories narrated for leisure, but complex cultural artefacts that express the philosophical foundations of Munda life.

The idea of land as sacred emerges vividly in Munda folktales. The tribe's connection with nature is not limited to livelihood but extends to cosmological grounding. Forests, soil, water bodies, and celestial elements are infused with spiritual significance. Many origin narratives portray the first Munda emerging from nature itself, highlighting a worldview where human existence is deeply interlinked with the environment. Singbonga, the supreme creator deity, is often depicted as the guiding spirit who shapes the destiny of both nature and humanity. Through storytelling, children learn that disrespecting natural resources provokes disorder, while harmony ensures prosperity. This ecological consciousness embedded in folktales serves as a reminder that tribal knowledge systems hold sophisticated environmental ethics relevant to contemporary discussions on sustainability and climate justice.

Munda folklore also reinforces social structures that promote equality and communal responsibility. Unlike caste-based social systems, which historically relegated certain groups to marginalised positions, Munda social organisation emphasises collective wellbeing. Tales showcasing the institution of village councils, known as parka or manjhi-parganait,

demonstrate principles of decision-making based on consensus rather than dominance. Storytellers highlight the role of community leaders who maintain social harmony, regulate disputes, and safeguard cultural customs. The stories thus function as moral instruction manuals that familiarise listeners with social obligations and expectations, preparing the younger generation to uphold community integrity.

Ancestor worship forms another central theme in Munda folktales. Ancestral spirits are believed to remain protectors of the living, ensuring order and guiding moral behaviour. Tales illustrate that forgetting ancestral rituals or disobeying inherited customs attracts misfortune. By reminding the community of its historical roots and shared lineage, folktales act as bridges between the past and present. They reaffirm the belief that cultural survival relies on honouring the elders and sustaining traditional practices passed down through generations.

Gender representations in Munda folktales reveal both cultural values and transformations. While some stories reflect patriarchal norms commonly found in rural Indian societies, many narratives depict women as wise, strong, and capable decision-makers. Heroines in Munda tales often demonstrate bravery in times of crisis, possessing knowledge of medicinal plants or divination that rescues family or village from danger. Their participation in agricultural labour and ritual ceremonies is portrayed not as secondary but as indispensable. This portrayal counters stereotypical assumptions about tribal women being voiceless or powerless. Instead, translations of these tales reveal that Munda society acknowledges women as central pillars of cultural and economic life, despite certain traditional gender boundaries.

Supernatural elements such as spirits, witches, and shape-shifting entities widespread in Munda folktales are not merely imaginative additions but cultural symbols. These figures help articulate fears, doubts, desires, and moral dilemmas faced by the community. For example, the presence of forest spirits often teaches caution and respect for sacred spaces, while narratives involving malevolent beings highlight the danger of greed, envy, or deceit. Such

symbolic representations maintain psychological balance within the community by explaining adversities and encouraging resilience.

Translation of Munda folktales into English involves sensitive cultural negotiation. Oral narratives contain indigenous vocabulary, ritual expressions, and metaphors that usually lack direct equivalents in English. Words like jaher, sarana, bonga or rituals such as Mage Parab and Karam possess layered meanings rooted in tribal cosmology. Translators must navigate the challenge of communicating these nuances to unfamiliar audiences. If translated too literally, the essence may appear obscure; if excessively simplified, it risks cultural distortion. Thus, translation becomes an act of cultural responsibility, requiring the translator to recognise themselves as a mediator and not merely a linguistic converter.

Furthermore, the oral performance aspect of folktales is integral to their meaning. Tone, gestures, rhythm, audience participation, and environmental setting all enrich narrative impact. When stories move onto the printed page, this performative cultural richness may be lost. Some translators utilise footnotes or contextual introductions to preserve interpretive depth, but academic readers still must approach such texts with cultural sensitivity.

The need for translation has grown urgent due to shifting cultural landscapes. Modernisation, agricultural decline, economic migration, and the dominance of state languages like Odia and Hindi have contributed to diminishing oral transmission. Young Munda generations increasingly prefer globalised media over traditional storytelling events around the village courtyard. In such contexts, translation and written documentation serve as tools of cultural preservation and revival. They ensure that even if oral traditions weaken, the stories do not vanish from memory.

Translation also positions Munda folktales within academic frameworks where they gain recognition as serious literature. Historically, tribal stories were dismissed as primitive or childish, unworthy of scholarly attention. Presently, the rising acknowledgement of indigenous

knowledge systems has expanded literary studies to include such narratives as valuable sources of sociological and philosophical insight. By translating Munda folktales into English, researchers contribute to decolonising literary discourse and validating Adivasi intellectual traditions.

This inclusion additionally supports identity politics. The Munda community, like many tribal groups, has faced marginalisation through displacement, land alienation, and cultural silencing. Folktales narrate resistance against oppressive forces, whether human or supernatural. These themes resonate with wider struggles of indigenous communities across the world. Translations expose these global parallels and promote solidarity-based research.

Moreover, translations facilitate comparative folkloric and anthropological studies. Researchers can analyse similarities and differences between Munda tales and those of other tribes or world cultures, uncovering universal archetypes such as the trickster, the brave maiden, or the wise elder. Such analysis strengthens understanding that stories are foundational elements of the human experience, connecting diverse communities across temporal and geographical boundaries.

Despite its benefits, translation must acknowledge ethical guidelines involving representation and ownership of indigenous culture. Communities must be involved in decision-making regarding how their stories are interpreted and published. Too often, scholarly extraction of tribal knowledge has occurred without community participation or benefit. Ethical translation requires respect for community voices, equitable acknowledgement of storytellers, and a commitment to preserving narrative authenticity.

The richness of Munda folktales also lies in their linguistic artistry. Rhymes, repetitive patterns, and playful language capture listeners' imagination and help ensure memorability. When translated, maintaining such aesthetic finesse demands creative skill. A translator may recreate similar rhythmic effects or retain selected indigenous terms to retain cultural rhythm.

When done effectively, translation not only informs but also evokes the emotional landscape of the original narrative.

Ultimately, Munda folktales are cultural treasures that depict sophisticated belief systems built on harmony, resilience, and community ethics. They carry ecological teachings urgently relevant today, as global societies confront environmental degradation. By sustaining reverence for land and acknowledging nature's agency, Munda traditions offer alternative viewpoints to capitalist exploitation. The stories also celebrate diversity, interdependence, and mutual respect—values essential for peaceful coexistence in a pluralistic world.

In conclusion, translating Munda folktales into English represents a significant endeavour to preserve and promote indigenous knowledge systems facing existential threats. Translation opens doors to academic recognition, intercultural dialogue, and cultural revival within the community. However, the act of translation must remain conscious of its limits and responsibilities. The emotional depth, performative context, and cultural intricacies embedded in oral stories must be handled with empathy and informed scholarship. The survival of Munda folktales depends on continual engagement between storytellers, researchers, and younger generations through both oral and translated forms. Safeguarding these narratives ensures that the wisdom of Munda ancestors remains a guiding force for future cultural identity and global understanding.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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