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**BETWEEN CONTINUITY AND EROSION:
INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF INDIGENOUS
KNOWLEDGE AMONG THE ORAON (KURUKH) OF CENTRAL
INDIA**

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous knowledge remains socially alive only when it is learned, practised and transmitted across generations. Among the Oraon (Kurukh) of Central India, scholarship has documented substantial knowledge relating to indigenous foods, medicinal plants, forest resources, agriculture, language and cultural practices, yet the question of intergenerational transmission has received comparatively limited focused attention. This paper examines the space between continuity and erosion by synthesising Oraon-specific studies with wider research on Indigenous and local knowledge transmission. Using a focused narrative review, it analyses four interrelated domains: ecological and forest knowledge; medicinal and food knowledge; agricultural and livelihood knowledge; and oral-cultural knowledge, including language and customary practice. The review shows that knowledge transmission is not a simple binary of preservation versus disappearance. Different domains may persist, adapt, become fragmented or erode depending on opportunities for observation, participation, language use, livelihood practice, intergenerational contact and community institutions. Education, migration, market integration and digital media can weaken some traditional learning environments, but they can also create new channels for documentation and cultural renewal. The paper argues that the central issue is therefore not whether Oraon Indigenous knowledge survives in general, but which knowledge continues to be reproduced, in what form, through whom, and under what social conditions.

Keywords: Oraon; Kurukh; Indigenous knowledge; intergenerational transmission; traditional ecological knowledge; cultural continuity; knowledge erosion; Central India

1. INTRODUCTION

Indigenous knowledge survives only when it is carried forward. A community may possess a rich body of ecological, medicinal, agricultural, food-related and cultural knowledge, but the long-term vitality of that knowledge depends on whether younger generations encounter it, learn it, practise it and eventually transmit it themselves. Indigenous and local knowledge is therefore not simply a store of inherited information; it is a living system embedded in relationships among people, landscapes, livelihoods, language and community institutions (Brondízio et al., 2021). When those relationships change, the knowledge associated with them may also persist, adapt, fragment or gradually erode.

This question is particularly significant for the Oraon, who commonly identify themselves as Kurukh or Kurunkh and whose mother tongue, Kurukh, belongs to the Dravidian language family. Oraon communities are distributed across Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, West Bengal and other parts of eastern and central India, often in multilingual social environments (Panda & Mall, 2013). Their cultural life historically developed in close interaction with agriculture, forests, local biodiversity, kinship, oral tradition, ritual practice and community institutions. Consequently, knowledge about plants, foods, cultivation, seasonal rhythms, healing, customary behaviour and oral memory cannot be separated easily from everyday social practice.

Oraon-specific research demonstrates the depth of this knowledge. In Jashpur district of Chhattisgarh, ethnobotanical studies have documented the use of locally available plants for diverse ailments and household healthcare (Ekka et al., 2016). In Jharkhand, Ghosh-Jerath et al. (2015) identified more than 130 indigenous foods in Oraon food environments and showed that many had significant nutritional value. Research on edible weeds and wild plants has similarly highlighted extensive Oraon knowledge of plant resources used as food and medicine (Marandi & Britto, 2015). Such studies are valuable because they establish that Indigenous knowledge is not merely symbolic heritage: it remains connected to nutrition, health, subsistence and environmental use.

Yet there is a crucial difference between documenting knowledge and understanding its transmission. An inventory can show that elders know medicinal plants, that certain foods are collected, or that a ritual is still observed. It cannot by itself demonstrate whether younger people possess the same depth of knowledge, whether they can perform the associated practice independently, or whether they will be able to teach it to the next generation. A young person may recognise the name of a medicinal plant but not know when it is collected, how it is prepared or how it is used. A cultural event may remain publicly visible even while the meanings, songs, stories or procedural knowledge surrounding it become thinner. Knowledge can therefore remain present while becoming increasingly fragmented.

Broader research on local ecological knowledge demonstrates that such generational differences are widespread. Aswani et al. (2018), in a global review, found that erosion was the most frequently reported trend in studies of local ecological knowledge, with age differences often used as an indicator. Research in India also shows that knowledge acquisition is strongly structured by the life course. Among the Jenu Kuruba of South India, Demps et al. (2012) found that children initially learned heavily from parents, while other demonstrators became more important later; the

oldest cohort had the highest average explicit knowledge, although expertise did not belong exclusively to elders. This matters because knowledge is not transmitted automatically by biological succession. It depends on social contact, practical participation and opportunities to learn.

The present paper therefore asks a more focused question: what happens to Oraon Indigenous knowledge as it moves—or fails to move—from one generation to another? Rather than treating cultural change as an opposition between “tradition” and “modernity,” it considers four possible conditions: continuity, adaptation, fragmentation and erosion. The central argument is that Oraon Indigenous knowledge should be understood neither as uniformly preserved nor as uniformly disappearing. Different knowledge domains are likely to show different trajectories because the conditions of learning have changed unevenly. The crux of the paper is thus not whether Oraon knowledge survives in general, but which knowledge continues to be reproduced, in what form, through whom, and under what social conditions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Indigenous knowledge as a transmitted social system

Indigenous and local knowledge is produced through long-term engagement with particular environments, livelihoods and social worlds. Brondízio et al. (2021) emphasise that Indigenous and local knowledge, values and practices are locally grounded but relevant to wider questions of biodiversity, environmental governance and socio-ecological resilience. This perspective is important because it moves Indigenous knowledge away from the notion of a static catalogue of customs. Knowledge remains functional through repeated use, observation, interpretation and transmission.

Cultural transmission can occur through several pathways. Knowledge may be transmitted vertically from parents or grandparents to children, horizontally among peers, or obliquely from elders, specialists and other non-parental community members. The importance of these pathways changes across the life course. Demps et al. (2012), studying honey-collection knowledge among the Jenu Kuruba, showed that much knowledge was acquired by the early twenties and that parents were particularly important demonstrators in childhood, while other knowledgeable individuals became more important later. Their findings also distinguish explicit knowledge from embodied skill: knowing about a practice is not always equivalent to being able to perform it. This distinction is highly relevant to Oraon knowledge domains such as plant collection, food processing, cultivation, ritual participation or healing.

Cristancho and Vining (2009) likewise showed that intergenerational transmission of traditional ecological knowledge depends on the broader developmental settings in which children learn. Changes in family life, livelihood activity and the everyday environment alter opportunities for younger people to observe and participate in culturally significant practices. Transmission is therefore not a single act of teaching. It is a cumulative process involving proximity to knowledgeable persons, repeated participation, language, memory, imitation and practical application.

2.2 Erosion, adaptation and changing learning environments

The erosion of Indigenous knowledge has been linked in international scholarship to market integration, formal schooling, migration, urbanisation, environmental change and livelihood transition, although their effects vary greatly between communities and knowledge domains (Aswani et al., 2018). These processes matter because they can reduce the time and spaces in which intergenerational learning traditionally occurred. When younger people spend less time in forests, farms or community work, they may encounter fewer opportunities to acquire tacit ecological and livelihood skills even if they remain culturally attached to their community.

However, external change is not the only explanation. Rao (2024) argues that internal cultural constraints can also shape knowledge erosion. Specialised knowledge may be selectively transmitted, withheld, restricted by status or governed by cultural rules concerning who is entitled to learn it. This insight cautions against assuming that all knowledge loss results from youth disinterest or “modernisation.” Transmission can weaken because opportunities to learn decline, because knowledge holders themselves transmit selectively, or because the perceived relevance of specific practices changes.

Education illustrates this ambiguity particularly well. Formal schooling can distance children from local learning environments if the curriculum, language of instruction and school calendar are poorly connected to Indigenous social life. Reviews of tribal education in India have repeatedly identified language and cultural mismatch as important problems (Sucharita, 2025). Yet education can also strengthen reflexive cultural awareness, documentation skills and institutional advocacy. Similarly, digital media can displace face-to-face interaction, but it can also create new channels for cultural memory. Rao, Narain and Sabir (2022), working with Santhal youth, found that participatory filmmaking enabled young people to document locally available foods, intergenerational knowledge and cultural practices; the process encouraged discussion about what should be preserved, revived or modified. Continuity, therefore, may occur through altered forms rather than exact reproduction.

2.3 Oraon knowledge: rich documentation, limited focus on transmission

The Oraon literature offers strong documentation of specific knowledge domains. Ghosh-Jerath et al. (2015), through an exploratory cross-sectional study in Jharkhand, documented a diverse food environment including cultivated crops, wild fruits, leafy vegetables, roots, tubers, insects and other locally accessed foods. The study demonstrated that food knowledge was tied to seasonal availability, forests, fields, home gardens and local water resources. This is important for transmission because such knowledge is learned partly through repeated interaction with these places rather than through verbal instruction alone.

Ethnobotanical work in Jashpur similarly demonstrates detailed medicinal knowledge among Oraon communities. Ekka et al. (2016) recorded plant-based treatments used for a wide range of ailments, indicating a sophisticated locally embedded healthcare repertoire. Marandi and Britto (2015) documented edible weeds and wild plants used by Oraon communities in Latehar, showing overlap between food and medicinal knowledge. Taken together, these studies indicate that Indigenous knowledge is interconnected: a plant may simultaneously be food, medicine, ecological

indicator and part of a seasonal livelihood practice.

Language is another key dimension because oral traditions, classifications, songs, place-based vocabulary and cultural meanings are frequently carried through the mother tongue. The SCSTRTI ethnographic handbook notes that Oraon people identify their language as Kurukh while also using several regional languages in multilingual settings (Panda & Mall, 2013). Contemporary documentation from the Centre for Endangered Languages has also noted declining use of Kurukh among some younger speakers and emphasised the need for revitalisation and mother-tongue education (Centre for Endangered Languages, n.d.). Language shift does not automatically erase Indigenous knowledge, but it can weaken the vocabulary and interpretive categories through which knowledge is organised and remembered.

Recent research on Oraon youth in Jashpur further suggests a transitional social environment in which education, occupational aspirations, migration intentions and cultural participation interact in complex ways (Sahu & Kurre, 2026). Such work is useful, but it does not directly measure how particular bodies of knowledge move between generations. The key gap remains that Oraon studies have more often asked what knowledge exists than how securely that knowledge is being reproduced.

This paper addresses that gap conceptually by bringing Oraon-specific documentation into conversation with the wider literature on cultural transmission. The resulting framework treats continuity as an empirical question rather than an assumption. A knowledge domain can be culturally visible yet reproductively weak; conversely, it can change its outward form while retaining important meanings, skills or functions.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a focused narrative-review approach suitable for a short exploratory paper. It does not claim to be a systematic review and does not generate primary field data. Instead, it synthesises two bodies of literature: first, empirical studies dealing specifically with Oraon/Kurukh knowledge, food, ethnobotany, language and social change; and second, wider scholarship on intergenerational transmission, traditional ecological knowledge and Indigenous knowledge erosion.

Sources were identified through searches of major scholarly publishers, PubMed/PMC, PLOS, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis, SAGE, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs repository and specialised Indian journals and institutional repositories. Search combinations included terms such as “Oraon indigenous knowledge,” “Kurukh knowledge transmission,” “Oraon traditional food,” “Oraon medicinal plants,” “intergenerational traditional ecological knowledge,” “tribal knowledge transmission India,” and “Indigenous youth knowledge transmission.” Priority was given to peer-reviewed research that contributed directly either to the empirical understanding of Oraon knowledge or to the explanation of transmission mechanisms. Official and institutional materials were used selectively for ethnographic and language context.

The literature was read thematically across four broad domains: (1) ecological and forest knowledge; (2) medicinal and food knowledge; (3) agricultural and livelihood knowledge; and (4) oral-cultural knowledge, including language and customary practice. The synthesis then interpreted

each domain through four possible trajectories—continuity, adaptation, fragmentation and erosion. Because the Oraon-specific transmission literature remains limited, the paper avoids claiming measured rates of knowledge loss. Its purpose is instead to identify the most plausible mechanisms and researchable patterns emerging from the available evidence.

4. DISCUSSION: BETWEEN CONTINUITY AND EROSION

4.1 Continuity through everyday practice

The literature suggests that the strongest forms of continuity are likely to occur where knowledge remains embedded in recurrent practice. Indigenous foods provide a clear example. Ghosh-Jerath et al. (2015) documented a highly diverse Oraon food environment in which foods were accessed from fields, forests, home gardens and local markets. Knowledge of such foods is not merely declarative; it involves recognising species, knowing where and when to collect them, understanding preparation techniques and evaluating taste, availability and usefulness. Where these practices continue to contribute to household food systems, opportunities for intergenerational learning remain comparatively strong.

The same logic applies to ecological and agricultural knowledge. Children and young adults who continue to participate in farming, forest collection or seasonal food gathering are more likely to acquire knowledge through observation and repeated action. Demps et al. (2012) demonstrate why this matters: practical knowledge accumulates through age-structured social learning and cannot be reduced to formal instruction. Thus, continuity is strongest when knowledge is socially useful and embedded in activities that still form part of everyday life.

4.2 Fragmentation: knowing without practising

A second trajectory is fragmentation. Younger people may retain names, symbols or general awareness while losing procedural depth. This distinction is especially important for medicinal knowledge. Oraon ethnobotanical studies document numerous plant uses and preparation practices (Ekka et al., 2016; Marandi & Britto, 2015). Yet the existence of such knowledge among selected adult informants cannot establish that the same competence is evenly distributed across generations. Medicinal knowledge may become concentrated among elders or specialists, while younger people retain only recognition of commonly used plants.

Fragmentation can therefore occur in layers. A person may know a plant name but not its habitat; recognise its use but not its preparation; observe a ritual but not understand its sequence or meaning; speak some Kurukh but lack specialised ecological vocabulary. This is analytically different from complete erosion. It represents partial continuity in which cultural recognition remains stronger than practical mastery.

4.3 Adaptation rather than simple disappearance

Knowledge transmission also adapts. The participatory filmmaking study with Santhal youth provides an instructive Indian example: young people used digital media to document food practices and elicit knowledge from older community members, thereby creating a new channel of transmission (Rao et al., 2022). Similar possibilities are relevant to Kurukh language, songs, oral

histories, food knowledge and environmental practices. Digital recording, social media, community archives and mother-tongue educational initiatives can extend the life of knowledge beyond traditional face-to-face settings.

Adaptation should not, however, be romanticised. Digitisation can preserve representations without preserving competence. Watching a video about a medicinal preparation is not the same as acquiring the ecological judgement, dosage knowledge or embodied skill needed to use it responsibly. Likewise, recording songs may preserve performance while weakening the social contexts in which those songs once carried ritual meaning. The key question is therefore whether new media supplement living transmission or substitute for it.

4.4 Erosion and the shrinking ecology of learning

Erosion becomes more likely when several learning conditions weaken simultaneously. Migration can reduce contact with elders and customary landscapes; occupational change can reduce participation in agriculture and forest-based activities; formal education can shift time and linguistic practice away from local settings; and market integration can replace locally produced foods and materials with purchased alternatives. Global evidence shows that such forces often coincide with declining local ecological knowledge, although no single factor explains change everywhere (Aswani et al., 2018).

For the Oraon, language deserves particular attention. Kurukh is not simply a vehicle for transmitting information; it contains culturally specific names, classifications, metaphors, stories and expressions. Multilingualism itself is not a threat and has long characterised many Indigenous communities, but intergenerational language shift can reduce access to knowledge encoded primarily in the mother tongue. Institutional documentation indicating reduced Kurukh use among some younger speakers therefore has implications beyond language preservation alone (Centre for Endangered Languages, n.d.).

At the same time, internal rules of transmission must be considered. Rao (2024) demonstrates that knowledge can erode even where elders remain knowledgeable if social or cultural constraints restrict transmission. For Oraon research, this suggests the need to distinguish widely shared household knowledge from specialised knowledge associated with healers, ritual practitioners or particular families. Not all intergenerational gaps should be interpreted as accidental loss; some may reflect historically selective modes of transmission.

4.5 A continuum rather than a binary

Taken together, the evidence supports a continuum model. Continuity occurs when knowledge remains known, practised and transmitted. Adaptation occurs when the knowledge or its function persists through changed practices, institutions or media. Fragmentation occurs when recognition survives but procedural depth or contextual meaning weakens. Erosion occurs when knowledge is no longer sufficiently learned or reproduced to remain socially viable.

This continuum provides a more useful lens than the common preservation/loss binary. It also avoids portraying younger Oraon merely as agents of cultural decline. Young people operate within changed educational, economic and technological environments. Some may disengage from

traditional practices, while others may reinterpret, document or revive them. The analytical task is therefore to examine the conditions that make different trajectories possible.

For future empirical work, the most useful comparison would not simply ask whether older respondents “know more” than younger respondents. It should distinguish awareness, practical competence and transmission capacity. A respondent may have heard of a practice, understand it conceptually, have observed it, participate in it, perform it independently, or be capable of teaching it. These are different levels of knowledge reproduction. Such a design would reveal whether the principal problem is lack of exposure, lack of practice, weakening language use, changing livelihood relevance or interrupted contact between knowledge holders and learners.

5. CONCLUSION

The available literature presents the Oraon as holders of substantial Indigenous knowledge relating to food, medicinal plants, forests, agriculture, language and cultural practice. Yet the survival of this knowledge cannot be inferred from documentation alone. A catalogue of plants or foods records what is known at a particular moment; it does not tell us whether the knowledge remains reproductively secure across generations.

This paper has argued that intergenerational knowledge among the Oraon is best understood as existing between continuity and erosion. Some knowledge remains embedded in everyday practice and therefore continues through observation and participation. Some adapts to new educational, linguistic or digital environments. Some becomes fragmented, with recognition surviving while practical competence weakens. Other knowledge may face erosion when the social ecology of learning—interaction with elders, use of Kurukh, participation in traditional livelihoods and access to customary environments—contracts significantly.

The central research implication is clear: future Oraon studies should shift from asking only what Indigenous knowledge exists to asking how knowledge is reproduced, by whom, through which relationships, and with what degree of practical competence. Such a shift would make it possible to distinguish cultural visibility from genuine intergenerational continuity. It would also avoid treating Indigenous communities as passive repositories of disappearing tradition. The Oraon are active cultural actors negotiating education, migration, livelihoods and digital change; the future of their knowledge systems will depend not on freezing culture in an earlier form, but on sustaining the social conditions through which knowledge can continue to be learned, used, evaluated and passed forward.

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