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## **Rhythms of Celebration: Korku Songs and Dance Traditions in the Holi Festival**

**Manish Shrihari Gaikwad**

Associate Professor of English,

Department of Languages,

Shri Shivaji Science College, Amravati.

**&**

**Gajanan A. Wagh**

Professor of Zoology,

Shri Shivaji Science College, Amravati.

### **Abstract:**

This research paper explores the rich cultural heritage of the Korku tribe, residing in the Melghat region within the Satpuda mountain ranges, with a focus on their unique songs and dance traditions associated with the Holi festival. Holi, a festival of colours holds special significance in Korku culture, where it is marked by a vibrant expression of music and dance that transcends mere celebration, becoming a deep-rooted cultural performance. This study, grounded in ethnographic research, delves into the unique rituals of the Korku tribe observed during the Holi festival. It explores the distinctive rhythmic patterns and lyrical content of Korku song and dance forms such as Fagnai, Horyar, Zamta, Fagva, and Sasun Gaduli. The paper reveals how these cultural expressions not only celebrate the arrival of spring but also play a crucial role in reinforcing social bonds and preserving the cultural identity of the Korku community.

The paper further examines the symbolic meanings embedded in these performances, showcasing how they reflect the Korku people's connection to nature, spirituality, and community life. By documenting and analysing these traditional art forms, this research aims to contribute to the preservation of Korku cultural heritage and offers insights into the broader understanding of indigenous festival practices in India.

**Keywords: Satpuda, Melghat, Korku, Holi, Fagnai, Horyar, Zamta, Fagva, Sasun Gaduli.**

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## **Introduction**

The Korku community, an indigenous tribe primarily residing in the Satpuda Mountain ranges, possesses a rich cultural heritage closely connected to their natural surroundings. The Satpuda's forests, rivers, and rugged terrain not only define their landscape but also shape their traditions, which are vividly expressed through festivals, songs, and music.

## **Role of Festivals in Korku Life**

Festivals in the Korku community are essential to their social, spiritual, and economic life. These celebrations align with agricultural cycles, natural events, and religious beliefs, ensuring community cohesion and survival.

### **Agricultural Significance:**

Many Korku festivals mark key agricultural milestones, like sowing, monsoons, and harvests. These rituals serve as thanksgiving and ensure communal participation in essential tasks. For example, during the Bhavai festival, worshipping 'Kheda Gomoj' is believed to protect crops and ensure a good harvest.

### **Spiritual and Religious Significance:**

Korku festivals honour deities linked to natural elements and ancestral spirits, seeking their blessings and protection. Rituals, such as those during Holi invoking Muthva Gomoj and Khandera Gomoj, are central to their spiritual life. Ancestral worship during festivals reinforces continuity and respect for tradition.

### **Social and Communal Importance:**

Festivals unite different segments of Korku society, fostering collective joy, feasting, and the reaffirmation of social ties. These occasions also serve as a means of passing down cultural knowledge, ensuring the preservation of Korku identity.

## **Significance of Songs and Music in Korku Culture**

Songs and music are integral to Korku festivals, serving as expressions of cultural identity, spiritual practices, and social communication.

### **Cultural Expression:**

Korku songs narrate stories of gods, heroes, and nature, preserving their heritage. Some songs, tied to rituals, are believed to influence outcomes, such as rainfall or protection from harm.

**Spiritual Significance:**

Songs invoke deities during festivals, creating a sacred soundscape that facilitates communication between the human and divine. Music is also used for spiritual protection and healing, reflecting the community's belief in the power of sound.

**Social Communication:**

Festival songs often include social commentary, humour, and satire, addressing issues and reinforcing norms in a non-confrontational manner. The participatory nature of Korku music strengthens communal ties and expresses collective identity.

**Korku Holi:**

Holi is the most important festival for the Korku community, celebrated with great fervor for five days. The Korku Holi, distinct from urban celebrations, begins the day after the full moon in Phalgun. The village prepares two Holikas, one large and one small, at opposite ends of the village. The Korku men gather bamboo branches from the forest to construct the Holikas, and the village Patel has the honour of performing the rituals and lighting the bonfire. The festival is a time of joy and celebration, with the entire village coming together to worship, dance, and sing.

The burning of the Holika is followed by five days of singing and dancing, with various folk songs being performed. These songs are a reflection of Korku life, filled with emotions, humour, and a deep connection to nature. The festival also includes the Jeri competition, where participants climb a greased pole to retrieve a prize. The songs sung during this competition are known as 'Jeri Songs.'

Holi is an integral part of Korku culture, embodying their religious, social, and cultural life. The folk songs associated with Holi are a rich expression of Korku emotions, values, and traditions, making the festival a vibrant celebration of Korku cultural heritage.

**Festival Association:** In the Korku community, Holi songs are sung from Kartik month's Dev-Ekadashi until Chaitra's Rang-Panchami. These songs are called 'Fagnai Sirinj.' After finishing their evening meals, everyone gathers at the Panchayat Bhavan, or Patel's or Chaudhary's - the village head's place. Accompanied by the beats of the dhol, manjira, and thali, these Fagnai songs, filled with romantic sentiments, are sung.



## Significance of Holi to the Korkus in Melghat

Holi is a cornerstone of Korku life in Melghat, symbolizing the renewal of nature and marking the agricultural calendar. The region's isolation has preserved Korku traditions, with Holi playing a vital role in resisting cultural erosion. The festival's rituals and songs, ensure fertility and good rains, while its joyous celebrations reaffirm Korku identity amidst modern challenges.

### Fagnai Song:

In the Korku community, the Holi festival celebrated in the month of Phalgun holds special significance. The songs associated with this festival are known as 'Fagnai Songs.' These songs start resonating in the air as early as the beginning of the month of Ashwin. Fagnai is the longest-celebrated song in Korku cultural life, with separate groups of men and women singing it. Men typically begin singing Fagnai songs after Diwali, while women immerse themselves in this singing from Dussehra. It is considered a form of preparation for the upcoming Holi festival. The singing of these songs, which begins during the Dussehra-Diwali period, continues uninterruptedly until Holi.

Women sing Fagnai songs without any musical instruments, swaying rhythmically while standing in a line during the night. In contrast, men accompany their singing with the 'Timki,' a drum-like instrument. To ensure a sharp sound, the Timki is played with its surroundings set alight, combining warmth from the fire with the drum's sharp beats. In recent times, instruments like the dhol, cymbals, and ankle bells have been added to the men's Fagnai song performances. As the night progresses, the enthusiasm for these songs grows.

The Fagnai songs reflect the social, cultural, and natural life of the Korku people, highlighting various emotions within family life in poetic language. The songs often depict images of deities, nature, love, and the intoxicating beauty of the Phalgun month, capturing the emotional resonance of the season. The songs of women also describe human characteristics using natural imagery and symbolism, making Fagnai songs a vibrant expression of Korku culture's beauty.

“Male male ni re dhupu khopa do sagu.

Dharani hati seneba do, dhupu khopa ghatayen.

Dhupu ma khopa lutura uri.

Buchu ma turup, muchur menti landayen.”



This means: “O beloved! Bring me beautiful flowers. I have to go to the Dharani market. The lover brings the beloved the Akav flowers. The beloved makes a garland of these flowers and adorns her hair with it. When the beloved gazes at herself in the mirror, she sees the garland touching her youthful charms, and she begins to smile to herself.”

This passage beautifully captures the tender emotions and romantic expressions inherent in the Fagnai songs, which are a significant part of the Korku community's cultural practices during the Holi festival.

Along with love songs, these melodies also invite the deities to join in the festive, colourful atmosphere, ensuring that even the gods and goddesses are not left behind in this season of colours.

“Khendra hunju dai Holi re.  
Kajli dongren hunju dai re.  
Ama hejje meten dai.  
Kende taadai rata dayen.  
Muthwa hunju dai Holi re.  
Kheda hunju dai Holi re.  
Khandera hunju dai Holi re.”

The above song invokes the Gods thus: “O Khendera God! Come, let’s play Holi together. Look, with your arrival, even the dark-skinned girl has turned red. Come, Muthva God, let’s play Holi. Come, Kheda God, let’s play Holi. O deities! Come, let’s play Holi together.”

“Gongolya re, Rera Rangi, Susun Bai Kaniya”

In this folk song related to the Holi festival, while the people are drenched in the atmosphere filled with colours, why should the birds stay behind? A local bird, the Nilkanth (Indian Roller), also doesn’t hesitate to express its thoughts, which the Korku community has vividly captured in this delightful and heartfelt song.



### **Horyar Song:**

The Horyar song, an integral part of Korku folk culture, is sung by men for five days following the burning of Holika during the Holi festival. The Korku people celebrate Holi in a unique way. Unlike urban celebrations, the Korku Holi starts a day later and lasts for five days. The village has two Holikas, one large and one small, built at opposite ends. The young men of the village go to the forest to collect green bamboo branches, which are placed in the center, around which the Holika is built. After the village leader, or Patel, performs a ritual, the group of Korku singers, facing each other in two lines, begins the Holika procession from the large Holika to the small one, singing ‘Holibobolo Songs.’ This marks the beginning of the Horyar songs, which are sung for the next five days.

During these songs, the Korku people remember their deities, including Muthva and Kheda Gomoj, as well as Ravana, who is mentioned with great respect. Ravana is seen as a protector in these songs, similar to his role in the Danda and Dhandel songs. The Korku singers continue singing Horyar songs as they move back and forth between the Holika site and the Muthva Gomoj site. Horyar is an emotional folk song form, rich with references to Korku life, values, and aesthetics, expressed through symbolic or metaphorical language. The rhythmic beat of the anklet bells worn by the performers adds to the musicality of these Holi-related songs, known collectively as Horyar songs.

“Aare bala aao, Purname Fagun khele Khele Maharaj: Aao Purname Holi Fagun khele  
Rani Chali woke, Mayaka me O lal, Raja chale, sasurai, Are bala Purname Fagun khele.  
Ranike hatho-me Gulab ki Chadiya, Rajaka hatho-me Kamal, Aare bala Purname Fagun  
khele.

Raja bethere houda, Rani bethere havadar, Aare bala Purname Fagun khele.”

This means; “Maharaj (King) is playing Holi in Purna (River by name Purna) but Rani (Queen) has started for her mother's place. Maharaj is also following her to his mother-in-law’s place. The queen has a rose flower in her hand while the Maharaj is having a lotus flower in his hand. The queen is sitting in a palanquin while Maharaj sitting on the back of elephant is playing Holi in Purna.”



### **Zamta Song:**

For five days after the burning of Holika, the Zamta song is sung by both men and women of the Korku community. While Korku folk songs typically have separate male and female versions, the Zamta song is unique in that it is performed by a mixed group. The Holi festival is the most important celebration for the tribal community, and during these five days, the entire village is filled with joy and vitality

The Korku people passionately preserve their cultural heritage through this festival. The village leader, or Patel, has the honour of performing the Holika rituals and lighting the bonfire. The Korku folk artists visit the Patel's house, inviting him to participate in the Holika Puja and burning through the Zamta song.

In keeping with traditional customs, the villagers also pay homage to their ancestral deities during this song. References to Korku deities such as Muthva, Kheda, Jodma-Jodha, Bhimarjun, and Mahadev are common, along with frequent mentions of King Ravana, underscoring his importance in Korku culture. The Zamta song is accompanied by the dhol and flute, with women using clapping as part of the sound production.

“Zmta hunju gelja hejken ja Lanka Ravana, zmta hunju gelja hejken re.  
Osrina jajhma bidile ja bai ranni, zamta hunju gelja hejken re.  
Churu bhar da ni anue ja bai rantri, zamta hunju gelja hejken re.  
Janjari chiloma ni anue ja bai ranni, zamta hunju gelja hejken re.”

This means: “To play Holi, King Ravanaa has come from Lanka. Hey sister, lay out the mat in the courtyard. Sister, offer a jug of water to King Ravanaa. Sister, give tobacco and a pipe to King Ravanaa for smoking. O sister, King Ravanaa of Lanka has come to play Holi.”

This passage vividly captures the respect and hospitality extended to King Ravanaa in the Korku folk song, where even the mighty king is depicted as participating in the joyous festivities of Holi. The imagery of offering water, tobacco, and a mat for him to sit on reflects the cultural significance of hosting and honouring guests during this vibrant celebration.

“Rewa paran pavi sadi ajume do, Rewa paran pavi sadi aajume re.  
Jati-jati nido dinger ajume do, Rewa paran pavi sadi aajume re.  
Aloma ni mandi dinger dayuba do, Rewa paran pavi sadi aajume re.





Baba rulum rulum dinger ajume do, Rewa paran pavi sadi aajume re.

Aloma ni judi dinger dayuba do, Rewa paran pavi sadi aajume re.”

This song expresses a message: “O Dingar! Hear the sound of my flute from across the river. Listen to the sound of the flute even as you work the millstone. O Dingar! Hear the sound of my flute even as you pound the rice. O Dingar! Listen to the flute's melody, and we will be united.”

This passage beautifully conveys a message of longing and connection through the sound of the flute. Despite the daily tasks and the distance across the river, the melody of the flute serves as a bridge, symbolizing the desire for union and the power of music to bring people together.

### **Fagwa Song:**

For five days after Holika Dahan, Korku men and women, dressed in festive attire, visit each house in the village, as well as stop travellers on the road, to collect Fagwa (gifts) while singing Fagwa songs. This gift collection is a communal activity, with each household in the village contributing at least one member. The collected items and money are then distributed equally among the villagers, or used to purchase a goat, which is shared among all the households. This practice, known as 'Got' in the Korku language, emphasizes the community spirit of the Korku people.

The Fagwa songs, sung with joy and enthusiasm, often include humorous elements, especially in the women's songs, where non-tribal travellers, referred to as 'Jangadi' are humorously addressed and playfully insulted as part of the gift-gathering ritual. The playful banter and communal spirit reflected in these songs illustrate the Korku people's cultural richness and unity.

“Deگو mayo re, mayo re

Mayo re Jamadarna, Deگو Mayo re, Mayo re, Mayo re

Nandya Go Mayo re. Dafedarna Deگو mayo re Mayo re, Mayo re”

In this song, the girls ask for Fag, i.e., Bakshis for Holi. They call the travellers Jamadar/Dafedar (i.e., officer or great man) and say, “I have come to you for getting Fag, please give us our due.”



### **Susun-Gaduli Dance:**

Dance is an ancient expression of human emotion, and in Korku culture, it holds as much, if not more, importance than oral traditions.

**Cultural Significance:** The Sasun-Gaduli dance is a highly popular and culturally significant folk dance in Korku tradition. It is performed during various festivals, including Holi, as well as during weddings and other major social gatherings. The dance is a vibrant expression of the Korku people's connection to their cultural heritage, and it plays a crucial role in maintaining and transmitting cultural values and practices.

**Social and Spiritual Significance:** This dance reflects the community's emphasis on collective celebration, the importance of social harmony, and the joy of communal life. Through the Sasun-Gaduli dance, the Korku people celebrate their cultural identity and reinforce their social bonds.

### **Performance Practices:**

**Participants:** The Sasun-Gaduli dance can be performed by men, women, or as a mixed-gender group, depending on the occasion. When performed as 'Gaduli,' it is exclusively a women's dance, while 'Sasun' is performed by men. The mixed-gender version of the dance is called 'Sasun-Gaduli.'

### **Structure and Form:**

**Dance Formation:** The dance is performed in a circular formation, with participants moving in sync to the rhythm of traditional instruments like the dhol (drum), flute, and ankle bells. The dancers may also use clapping or foot stomping to enhance the rhythm.

**Musical Accompaniment:** The music is a crucial element of the Sasun-Gaduli dance, with the changing rhythms and beats guiding the dancers' movements. The dhol and flute are the primary instruments, with the dhol providing the base rhythm and the flute adding a melodic layer to the performance.

**Themes:** The dance often reflects themes of nature, fertility, social unity, and the celebration of life. The lyrics, when present, may include references to agricultural practices, the changing seasons, and the joys and challenges of communal living.



### **Unique Features:**

**Versatility:** The Sasun-Gaduli dance is versatile and adaptable, performed during a wide range of occasions, from religious festivals to weddings. This versatility makes it a central component of Korku cultural life.

**Energetic and Rhythmic:** The dance is characterized by its energetic and rhythmic movements, which are both captivating and infectious. The dance's circular formation and synchronized steps create a sense of unity and harmony among the performers, symbolizing the interconnectedness of the community.

**Cultural Transmission:** As a key cultural practice, the Sasun-Gaduli dance plays a significant role in the transmission of Korku cultural values and traditions from one generation to the next. By participating in this dance, younger members of the community learn about their cultural heritage and the importance of social cohesion.

### **Conclusion:**

The Korku folk songs and dances—Fagnai , Horyar, Zamta, Fagwa , and Sasun-Gaduli—performed during the Holi festival—are integral to the community's cultural identity. They reflect the Korku people's connection to nature, their deities, and each other. These cultural expressions are not just forms of entertainment but are deeply embedded in the social, spiritual, and agricultural life of the Korku community, serving as a medium to preserve and celebrate their rich cultural heritage.