

Malur Karaga as a Living Knowledge System: Community, Ritual Economy, and Sustainable Cultural Heritage in Karnataka

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ABSTRACT

Malur Karaga, a deeply rooted ritual tradition in Karnataka, embodies a rich continuum of history, mythology and community based knowledge systems. Historically associated with the worship of Draupadi from the Mahabharata tradition, Karaga is believed to have evolved through centuries as a sacred practice upheld by specific community custodians, where ritual performance, oral narratives and symbolic enactments preserve collective memory and cultural identity. Oral histories and local accounts indicate that the Malur Karaga tradition has been practiced continuously for several centuries commonly traced back over 300–500 years sustained through hereditary custodians and community-led transmission. The festival also attracts thousands and lakhs of devotees and participants, including visitors from neighbouring districts and other states, reflecting its expanding socio-cultural significance beyond the local context. In Malur, this tradition has retained its localized distinctiveness while adapting to changing socio-cultural dynamics, making it a compelling example of a living Indian Knowledge System (IKS). This study conceptualizes Malur Karaga as an integrated knowledge system operating at the intersection of community agency, ritual economy and cultural sustainability. Adopting a qualitative-dominant mixed-method approach with an ethnographic orientation, the research draws on primary data through in-depth interviews, participant observation and focus group discussions with ritual specialists, community members and local economic actors. It examines how historically embedded knowledge is transmitted across generations, how community institutions informally govern the festival and how ritual practices sustain localized economic networks. By situating Malur Karaga within sustainability and policy frameworks, it proposes pathways for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage while promoting community-led development, demonstrating how historically evolved traditions function as resilient and adaptive knowledge systems in contemporary society.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), Malur Karaga, Ritual Economy, Community Agency, Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Introduction

In the quiet cultural landscape of Karnataka, Malur Karaga stands not as a spectacle, but as a deeply rooted, living expression of tradition that has silently endured through generations. Unlike widely publicized ritual festivals, Malur Karaga remains intimate, community driven and authentically preserved, making it a rare example of a cultural system that thrives without external validation or institutional support. It is here that culture is not displayed it is lived, practiced and continuously renewed through collective memory and participation.

Malur Karaga transcends the conventional understanding of a festival. It operates as a living knowledge system, where every ritual act encodes meaning, every participant becomes a carrier of

tradition and every cycle of celebration reinforces a shared identity. Knowledge is neither written nor formally taught instead, it flows organically through observation, participation and intergenerational transmission, ensuring continuity without dependence on documentation. This makes Malur Karaga not only resilient but also adaptive, capable of evolving while preserving its core essence.

What makes Malur Karaga particularly significant is its ability to integrate multiple dimensions of life into a single cultural framework. It sustains a ritual economy that supports local livelihoods, strengthens social cohesion through collective responsibility and maintains ecological balance through the use of natural materials and alignment with seasonal cycles. In doing so, it challenges modern assumptions that sustainability requires formal systems, proving instead that traditional practices can inherently embody sustainable principles.

Despite its richness, Malur Karaga remains largely underexplored in academic and policy discourse. Its localized nature has kept it away from mainstream attention, creating a critical gap in understanding how such traditions function as self-sustaining socio-cultural systems. This study seeks to bring Malur Karaga into focus not merely as a ritual, but as a dynamic, intelligent system where culture, economy and ecology converge.

Malur Karaga is not a tradition preserved in isolation it is a living system that organizes community, sustains knowledge and adapts to change, offering a powerful model for cultural resilience in the modern world.

Malur Karaga transforms a community into a living archive, where every ritual act becomes a record, every participant a bearer of knowledge and every cycle a renewal of cultural intelligence.

Review of Literature

- At the heart of the Malur Karaga is a striking ritual: a male priest, known as the Karaga bearer, dresses as Draupadi. Clad in a saree, bangles, and feminine jewelry, he carries a Karaga (sacred pot) on his head, adorned with jasmine flowers and long garlands symbolizing Draupadi's unbound hair. He becomes a vessel for her divine presence, leading a captivating nighttime procession through the streets. Surrounded by music, chants, and rituals, he doesn't merely represent Draupadi—he becomes her. This transformation is both deeply spiritual and symbolically bold, offering a fascinating commentary on gender and divinity. While a man undertakes this central role, women play a vital part in the festival's success. (EDUCATION, 2024) <https://www.cessedu.org/blog/malur-karaga-festival-living-celebration-draupadis-divine-power>
- For the Vahnikula Kshatriya community, Draupadi is more than a legendary queen—she is their *kuladevata* (family deity). In Malur, her story isn't distant mythology but a living source of values like justice, resilience, and devotion. Every ritual in the Karaga is infused with her presence, constantly reminding devotees of her strength and unwavering *dharma*. The epicenter of these celebrations is the Dharmaraya Temple, believed to be over 250 years old. Historical inscriptions from 1685 speak of land grants and the revival of the area by local rulers, who invited artisan communities and organized markets that continue to thrive today. (EDUCATION, 2024) <https://www.cessedu.org/blog/malur-karaga-festival-living-celebration-draupadis-divine-power>
- Malur was once called Malligepura. Jasmine flowers are cultivated widely in it. A famous temple is situated in [Chikka Tirupati](#), which means "small [Tirupati](#)" in [Kannada](#). [Karaga](#) is a major festival in Malur. The festival is celebrated in Malur exactly a week after it happens in [Bangalore](#). (WIKIPEDIA) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malur#Culture>
- The crowning glory is the Karaga festival, which is celebrated in the town of Malur, about 30 miles away on the [Bengaluru-Chennai](#) highway. It throws a flood of light on the Thigala clan's Draupadi worship ritual called the Karagafestival. The Malur-based Karaga festival is celebrated over 13 days in the summer months, usually starting on the first Friday after the Ugadi New Year day. (FAMILY PEDIA) https://familypedia.fandom.com/wiki/Kolar_district
- The participation of Muslim leaders in the Karaga Utsav, celebrated by the Thigal community of the taluk, carries a message of harmony. It is believed that Goddess Shakti is manifest in the form of a Karagad priestess who prays for peace and tranquility in humanity, good rain and

good crops. That is why the 'MaluruKaragad Shakti Utsav' is famous in the state.(KARNATAKA, 2026) <https://vijaykarnataka.com/news/kolar/malur-taluk-village-fest-karaga-people-gather-to-celebrate/articleshow/51945515.cms>

- Training three months in advance.The priest carrying the Karaga is required to undergo about three months of physical preparation and observe the rules and regulations. The strict training of the Vahnikula leaders greatly benefits the Karagad priest. Along with them, about 250 to 300 brave sons follow the rules and regulations and participate in the pujas, staying away from their homes until the end of the festival. (KARNATAKA, 2026) <https://vijaykarnataka.com/news/kolar/malur-taluk-village-fest-karaga-people-gather-to-celebrate/articleshow/51945515.cms>
- The celebration of Karaga Shaktyutsava is due to the cooperation and concern of Vahnikulastha Doddamuniyappa, Chikkamuniyappa, C. Papayya, R. Papanna, Velappa, Katurappa, Narayanappa and M.R. Chennarayappa. Velappa, Sandappa, Krishnappa, Seenappa, Abbanna, Narayanaswamy, Shankarappa, Srinivasa, Venkataramanappa, Sandappa and others belong to the priestly family of Karaga.(KARNATAKA, 2026) <https://vijaykarnataka.com/news/kolar/malur-taluk-village-fest-karaga-people-gather-to-celebrate/articleshow/51945515.cms>
- It is believed that this village Jatra celebration is the reason for the establishment of peace. It is also practiced that the girls of Malur, who are not from different parts, should participate in this festival of their hometown.(KARNATAKA, 2026) <https://vijaykarnataka.com/news/kolar/malur-taluk-village-fest-karaga-people-gather-to-celebrate/articleshow/51945515.cms>
- The Malur Karaga Festival, a distinctive ten-day event in April honoring Draupadi from the Mahabharata, centers on a ritual procession where a male devotee balances a flower-adorned pot (karaga) while dancing barefoot, attracting thousands for its display of devotion and fire-walking ceremonies. Additionally, the annual Rath Yatra organized by the local ISKCON temple in June or July sees chariots carrying deities Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra pulled by devotees, fostering a sense of shared spirituality and drawing participants from surrounding areas.(Grokikipedia, 2024) <https://grokikipedia.com/page/Malur>
- Malur's traditional arts are prominently represented by the stone sculpting heritage of Shivarapatna village in the taluk, where skilled artisans craft intricate granite statues of deities and mythological figures using techniques passed down through generations. This craft, involving over 300 families, produces sculptures in various styles influenced by historical dynasties like the Hoysalas and Vijayanagara, and supports local economy through sales to temples and collectors across India.(Grokikipedia, 2024) <https://grokikipedia.com/page/Malur>

Research Methodology

Data Collection Methods

- **Primary Data**
 - **Participant Observation**
 - Observing rituals, processions and ceremonies
 - Understanding:
 - Sequence of events
 - Role of participants
 - Symbolic meanings
 - **Interviews**
 - Semi-structured interviews with:
 - Priests
 - Elders
 - Local participants
- **Secondary Data**
 - Collected from:
 - Newspaper articles (regional coverage)

- Government cultural records
- Academic journals
- Books on Karaga traditions

Sampling Technique

Type: Purposive Sampling

- Participants selected based on:
- Direct involvement in Karaga
- Knowledge of tradition

Tools and Techniques

- Interview schedules

Data Analysis Methods

- **Thematic Analysis**
 - Identifying key themes:
 - Knowledge transmission
 - Ritual economy
 - Community participation
- **Narrative Analysis**
 - Interpreting:
 - Stories
 - Oral traditions
 - Ritual meanings
- **Comparative Analysis**
 - Comparing Malur Karaga with:
 - Other regional Karaga traditions
 - To identify uniqueness

Ethical Considerations

- Informed consent from participants
- Respect for:
- Religious beliefs
- Ritual secrecy
- No interference in sacred practices

This methodology enables the study to move beyond documentation and enter the lived reality of Malur Karaga, capturing it not just as an event, but as a dynamic and self-sustaining cultural system.

Results and Findings

The results of this study establish that Malur Karaga is far more than a ritualistic celebration; it is a self-sustaining cultural system where knowledge, economy, and community are seamlessly interwoven. The findings reveal that knowledge is not preserved through documentation but through disciplined practice, where each ritual act becomes a medium of transmission across generations. The festival fosters a strong sense of collective ownership, with the community functioning as both the custodian and the executor of tradition. Simultaneously, it generates a localized ritual economy that supports livelihoods without compromising cultural integrity. Its reliance on natural materials and seasonal alignment further reflects an inherent ecological consciousness embedded within tradition. Despite challenges such as limited documentation and declining youth engagement, Malur Karaga continues to demonstrate remarkable resilience, sustained by belief, participation and continuity. Thus, the study conclusively highlights Malur Karaga as a living, adaptive system that not only preserves heritage but actively organizes social, economic and cultural life within the community.

Malur Karaga emerges from the findings not as a passive cultural relic, but as an active and evolving system of lived knowledge. It challenges conventional notions of preservation by demonstrating that continuity is achieved through participation rather than documentation. The ritual acts function as

structured processes of learning, where each generation inherits responsibility along with tradition. The community-driven nature of the festival ensures social cohesion, while its informal economic activities provide tangible benefits to local stakeholders. Moreover, its alignment with ecological practices reflects an intrinsic sustainability that modern systems often strive to achieve artificially. In essence, Malur Karaga represents a model where culture itself becomes a mechanism of resilience and continuity.

The study ultimately reveals that Malur Karaga is not sustained by external recognition but by internal conviction. It is a system where every individual becomes a participant, every ritual becomes a lesson and every cycle becomes a renewal of collective identity. The absence of formal structures does not weaken it instead, it strengthens its adaptability and authenticity. By simultaneously preserving knowledge, generating economic activity and maintaining ecological balance, Malur Karaga demonstrates a rare form of holistic sustainability. It stands as clear evidence that traditional community systems possess an inherent intelligence capable of organizing and sustaining themselves across time.

Malur Karaga proves that tradition does not survive by being preserved it survives by being practiced, shared and continuously re-created by the community itself.

Discussion

Malur Karaga as a Living Knowledge System.

The findings of this study position Malur Karaga not merely as a cultural practice, but as a self-sustaining socio-cultural system that challenges conventional frameworks of knowledge, economy and sustainability. Unlike formal systems where knowledge is codified and institutionalized, Malur Karaga demonstrates that knowledge can be embedded within practice and transmitted through lived experience. This aligns with interpretivist perspectives, where meaning is constructed through participation and with ethnographic understanding of rituals as carriers of collective memory.

From a systems theory perspective, Malur Karaga functions as a closed-loop cultural system, where inputs such as belief and participation are continuously transformed into outputs like social cohesion, economic activity and cultural continuity. The feedback mechanism through elders, community norms, and repeated ritual cycles ensures correction and preservation without the need for external regulation. This directly supports the conceptual model of the Ritual Intelligence Grid, where each component of the system reinforces the other, creating a dynamic and adaptive structure.

The study also highlights the presence of a ritual economy, which operates on principles fundamentally different from formal market systems. Transactions within Malur Karaga are largely trust-based, community-oriented and seasonal, emphasizing collective benefit over individual profit maximization. This reflects elements of embedded economy as discussed in economic anthropology, where economic activities are inseparable from social and cultural contexts. Such a model challenges dominant economic assumptions and offers insights into alternative, community-driven economic systems.

Furthermore, the ecological dimension of Malur Karaga reveals an inherent sustainability framework, where environmental consciousness is not imposed through policy but integrated into tradition. The use of natural materials, minimal waste generation and alignment with seasonal cycles demonstrate how indigenous practices can achieve sustainability organically. This supports theories of cultural ecology, which emphasize the interdependence between human practices and environmental systems. However, the discussion also acknowledges emerging challenges. The gradual decline in youth participation and the absence of formal documentation pose risks to long-term continuity. While the oral and experiential nature of knowledge transmission has sustained the tradition thus far, increasing modernization may disrupt these mechanisms. Additionally, the lack of institutional recognition limits opportunities for preservation and wider understanding. These challenges indicate the need for a balanced approach, where documentation and support are introduced without compromising the authenticity and community ownership of the tradition. Overall, the discussion establishes that Malur Karaga represents a holistic model of cultural resilience, where knowledge, economy and ecology are not separate domains but interconnected elements of a single system. It demonstrates that traditional practices possess an inherent intelligence capable of organizing and sustaining themselves, offering valuable lessons for contemporary debates on sustainability, cultural preservation and community development. Malur Karaga does not merely survive within society it actively shapes and sustains it, proving that tradition, when lived collectively, becomes a system capable of enduring and adapting across time.

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