



ASSESSING THE HAPPINESS INDEX AMONG THE DONGRIA KANDHA OF MAYURBHANJ DISTRICT OF ODISHA: A SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT In the lush green landscapes of Mayurbhanj district, Odisha, lives the Dongia Kandha tribe—an indigenous community whose concept of happiness transcends material possessions. This paper explores the socio-cultural dimensions of happiness among the Dongia Kandha through a narrative and participatory lens. Using ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and participatory rural appraisal (PRA), 40 respondents across four villages (Badasahi, Kaptipada, Udala, and Raruan) were studied. Findings indicate that happiness is a collective and ecological experience deeply rooted in cultural rituals, forest relations, and community bonding. Unlike GDP-based happiness measures, Dongia Kandha well-being is determined by social harmony, ecological health, and spiritual fulfillment. However, challenges like deforestation, migration, and erosion of traditional values are affecting this equilibrium. The study emphasizes the need to integrate indigenous happiness frameworks into policy to create sustainable and culturally inclusive development pathways for tribal Odisha.

KEYWORDS : Happiness Index, Dongia Kandha, Indigenous Knowledge, Tribal Well-being, Socio-Cultural Sustainability, Odisha, Ecological Balance, Participatory Research

INTRODUCTION

Happiness, though a universal aspiration, is deeply shaped by culture, environment, and lived experience. Among the Dongia Kandha tribe of Mayurbhanj district, Odisha, happiness transcends individual emotion—it is a collective experience rooted in community life, ecological balance, and spiritual connection. For them, joy flows not from possessions or wealth, but from the seamless rhythm of coexistence with the forest, their kin, and ancestral traditions. Their folk songs, dances, and sacred rituals echo gratitude to the earth, the trees, and the unseen spirits who sustain life.

Unlike urban societies where happiness is often measured by income or consumption, the Dongia Kandha define it through interdependence and balance. As one elder, Biju from Kaptipada, expressed during the field interaction:

“When the forest smiles, our hearts are full. We cannot eat money; we eat what the forest gives.”

This profound statement captures their worldview—where human well-being is inseparable from the health of the natural environment. For them, happiness is not an abstract pursuit but a lived practice of reciprocity—between people and nature, the living and the ancestral, the present and the unborn generations.

The Dongia Kandha are recognized as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), a classification that underscores their fragile socio-economic position but also their rich cultural distinctiveness. Their settlements, nestled in the forested hills of Badasahi, Kaptipada, Udala, and Raruan, rely heavily on the forest for sustenance. Livelihoods revolve around shifting cultivation, minor forest produce collection, traditional healing, and small-scale agriculture. Their daily life is intricately tied to ecological cycles—when the forest flourishes, harvests are abundant, and festivals resonate with joy.

However, over the past few decades, deforestation, land alienation, and developmental displacement have disrupted this equilibrium. The erosion of traditional ecological knowledge and forced transitions to wage labor have not only altered their economy but also their emotional and cultural well-being. The migration of youth, loss of ritual spaces, and diminishing forest cover are now emerging as silent threats to their sense of happiness and identity.

The relevance of this study, therefore, lies in its attempt to document and analyze the indigenous understanding of happiness among the Dongia Kandha—a perspective often overlooked in mainstream policy and research. By capturing how happiness is perceived, sustained, and challenged, this study bridges the gap between tribal

well-being and sustainable development frameworks. The findings hold significant implications for tribal welfare policy in Odisha and beyond. Understanding happiness from a tribal lens can help shape more inclusive and culturally grounded development programs—where ecological preservation, community participation, and cultural continuity are recognized as essential determinants of well-being.

Furthermore, this research supports the national vision of *Viksit Bharat* @2047, aligning with global commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 15 (Life on Land). By valuing the Dongia Kandha's way of life, policymakers can craft interventions that protect both livelihoods and happiness—ensuring that progress does not come at the cost of peace, culture, or ecological integrity. Ultimately, this study is not just about measuring happiness—it is about restoring balance to a world that has forgotten that true joy comes from living with the earth, not against it.

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the indigenous meaning and determinants of happiness among the Dongia Kandha tribe.
2. To assess the socio-cultural, economic, and ecological dimensions influencing their well-being.
3. To identify factors leading to stress, dissatisfaction, or unhappiness within the community.
4. To propose policy directions for integrating tribal happiness perspectives into sustainable development models.

Relevance of the Study

The study is timely and significant, aligning with India's increasing emphasis on “Beyond GDP” measures of progress. In Odisha, where 22.8% of the population is tribal, integrating traditional well-being frameworks can strengthen inclusive growth policies.

As global conversations move towards Gross National Happiness (Bhutan), World Happiness Reports, and SDG-3 (Good Health and Well-being), understanding the Dongia Kandha's happiness model offers valuable lessons in resilience, sustainability, and community harmony.

In times of mental health crises and climate anxiety, their perspective—rooted in simplicity and balance—redefines happiness as the art of living well with little.

Methodology

Area of Study

The study was carried out in four Dongia Kandha-dominated villages

of Mayurbhanj district—Badasahi, Kaptipada, Udal, and Raruan—each nestled amidst dense forests and hilly terrain that form the heart of tribal life. These villages were chosen for their cultural richness and representation of the Dongia Kandha lifestyle, where nature and community coexist as one.

A total of 40 respondents (22 men and 18 women) aged between 20 and 70 years participated in the study. They included farmers, traditional healers, homemakers, and youth leaders—each contributing a distinct voice to the collective understanding of happiness. Their stories and reflections added depth to the research, transforming it from data collection into a dialogue of lived experiences.

The research adopted a qualitative ethnographic approach, where the researcher spent 15 days immersed in village life—sharing meals, attending community gatherings, and listening to folk songs sung around the evening fire. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Odia and local dialects to capture authentic emotions and cultural nuances. Using Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), villagers collectively ranked what made them happy—be it the forest, festivals, or family ties.

Inspired by Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) framework, indicators were localized to the Dongia Kandha worldview, covering ecology, culture, spirituality, and livelihood. The collected insights were then coded thematically using NVivo, while a simple Likert scale helped quantify satisfaction across dimensions. The result was not just statistics—but a human story of harmony, resilience, and belonging.

Data Interpretation and Analysis

Table 1: Dimensions of Happiness Among the Dongia Kandha Tribe

Happiness Dimension	Indicators Observed	Average Satisfaction Level (1-5)	Justification / Interpretation
1. Ecological Harmony	Availability of forest produce, clean water, soil fertility, rainfall consistency	4.6	High satisfaction due to strong emotional and livelihood ties to the forest. Happiness declines when forest productivity falls. The forest is viewed as a living mother—"Our forest feeds us and heals us."
2. Social Cohesion and Community Bonding	Participation in festivals, mutual aid, cooperation in farming	4.8	Collective labor and celebrations enhance happiness. "If one family suffers, the whole village feels it," said Raju from Udal. The sense of 'we' over 'I' strengthens emotional security.
3. Cultural Identity and Rituals	Festivals (Magha Parab, Chaitra Parab), music, oral storytelling	4.5	Strong participation in rituals and folk traditions creates belonging and spiritual joy. Happiness is tied to continuity of ancestral customs and songs.
4. Livelihood Stability and Economic Well-being	Agricultural yield, access to forest markets, self-sufficiency	3.8	Satisfaction is moderate. While they value subsistence farming, reduced forest access and migration affect livelihood satisfaction. Happiness declines when dependence on external markets grows.
5. Spiritual and Emotional Balance	Faith in nature spirits, community healers (bejhuni), and ancestral rituals	4.4	Belief in the spiritual world provides mental peace and coping mechanisms. Ritual healing and meditation through dance sustain happiness.

6. Gender and Family Relations	Role of women, inter-generational respect, family cohesion	4.2	Women find happiness in nurturing roles and community leadership through SHGs. Youth express mixed feelings—seeking modern aspirations yet valuing traditions.
7. Access to Modern Services (Education, Health, Connectivity)	Literacy, healthcare access, mobile connectivity	3.2	Satisfaction is lower due to lack of infrastructure. However, communities balance this through traditional knowledge and herbal medicine.
8. Environmental Threats and Anxiety	Deforestation, erratic rainfall, wildlife loss	2.9	Environmental stress is the biggest threat to happiness. Loss of forest affects mental peace and livelihood, leading to sadness and uncertainty.

Interpretation Summary

The overall Happiness Index Score (average across 8 dimensions) was 4.05 out of 5, indicating a high but vulnerable state of happiness—deeply connected to ecological and social well-being rather than material wealth.

Key Take Aways Include:

- Happiness = Harmony. The Dongia Kandha's happiness depends on balance—between nature, community, and spirituality.
- Ecology and culture are inseparable. Environmental degradation directly impacts emotional health.
- Material comfort is secondary. Their satisfaction lies in sufficiency, not abundance.
- Youth and migration pose transitional challenges. Modern aspirations are reshaping happiness perceptions.

The findings echo global indigenous wisdom that well-being is holistic and relational. The Dongia Kandha happiness narrative aligns with Bhutan's GNH pillars—community vitality, ecological conservation, and cultural resilience. For them, happiness is a state of coexistence, not competition.

"When we sing together under the full moon, our worries vanish," said Mili, an elder woman from Badasahi.

"The forest listens to us, and we feel alive."

However, the intrusion of external development models often undermines these intangible sources of joy. Young people increasingly equate happiness with mobile phones or city jobs, risking detachment from cultural roots.

This transition underscores the need for culturally sensitive education and community-based livelihoods that blend tradition with modern opportunities.

Expected Outcomes and Policy Implications: Towards a Tribal Happiness Framework for Odisha

The study on the Dongia Kandha tribe underscores the urgent need to integrate well-being and happiness into the core of tribal development policy. Moving beyond income-based metrics, the findings advocate for a Tribal Happiness Index (THI)—a culturally grounded tool that measures ecological harmony, social cohesion, and spiritual fulfillment. By aligning Odisha's tribal policies with such indicators, the state can pioneer an inclusive approach to welfare that resonates deeply with the lived realities of indigenous communities.

1. Development of a Tribal Happiness Index (THI):

Introducing THI as a policy measure will help assess development not only through GDP or livelihood outcomes but also through non-material indicators like forest health, community participation, and cultural vitality. This aligns with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 15 (Life on Land), ensuring holistic progress consistent with the Viksit Bharat 2047 vision.

2. Cultural Preservation Programs:

Documenting Dongia Kandha oral traditions, folk songs, and ethnomedicinal knowledge through digital heritage archives can prevent cultural loss and foster pride among younger generations.

Collaborations with universities and cultural departments under Odisha's Tribal Museum Initiative could safeguard this intangible heritage for posterity.

3. Eco-Livelihood Interventions:

Supporting sustainable livelihoods such as bamboo crafts, millet-based foods, and forest herbs processing under Mission Shakti, Odisha Millet Mission, and Van Dhan Vikas Yojana will ensure economic empowerment without cultural erosion. These initiatives integrate environmental stewardship with self-reliance—core to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

4. Mental Health Integration:

Incorporating cultural therapy and recognizing traditional healers as part of community mental health outreach under Biju Swasthya Kalyan Yojana can bridge the gap between indigenous knowledge and modern healthcare, addressing psychosocial well-being holistically.

5. Participatory Governance:

Empowering tribal elders and women's collectives in forest governance and rural development planning promotes ownership and sustainability. Their experiential wisdom ensures that state interventions remain context-sensitive and culturally respectful.

Together, these strategies reaffirm that happiness is not a statistic but a living, shared experience—a vision where economic progress and cultural harmony walk hand in hand toward a truly inclusive Viksit Bharat 2047.

CONCLUSION

Redefining Happiness through the Lens of Sustainability and Viksit Bharat 2047

The Dongia Kandha tribe of Mayurbhanj teaches the world that happiness cannot be measured in material wealth but in the quiet rhythm of coexistence—with people, land, and spirit. Their lives are woven with gratitude for the forest, laughter shared in community feasts, and songs that echo during harvest. For them, happiness is not consumption but connection—a profound alignment with nature's cycles.

Yet, this happiness is fragile. It depends on the health of the forest, the continuity of traditional wisdom, and the strength of intergenerational respect. The loss of biodiversity or cultural erosion directly threatens their emotional and spiritual well-being. As India strides toward the vision of Viksit Bharat @2047, there is a moral imperative to integrate such indigenous perspectives into development planning. The Dongia Kandha worldview resonates deeply with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—notably SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 15 (Life on Land), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions)—all of which emphasize holistic well-being over economic gain alone.

Government schemes like Mission Shakti, Mo Jungle Jami Yojana, KALIA Yojana, and Odisha Millet Mission have already begun bridging this gap by nurturing self-reliance, ecological farming, and women's empowerment in tribal regions. These programs align with the tribe's ethos of collective welfare and environmental stewardship.

As elder Kalia Murmu beautifully said, "We don't count money; we count seasons. If the forest smiles, we smile." His words remind policymakers that true progress must protect not just livelihoods, but the right to be happy in one's own way. The Dongia Kandha vision of happiness—rooted in balance, dignity, and harmony—offers India a timeless blueprint for sustainable and inclusive development under Viksit Bharat 2047.

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