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## MARBAT FESTIVAL: SHAPING IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY IN NAGPUR

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### **Abstract :**

*The Marbat Festival of Nagpur is a unique cultural tradition with deep historical, social, and political significance. Originating in 1885 as a symbolic protest against British colonial rule, the festival has evolved into a powerful platform for social expression and communal bonding. This paper explores the historical roots, cultural importance, and community participation in the festival, highlighting its role in reinforcing Nagpur's regional identity. Additionally, the study addresses contemporary challenges such as commercialization, environmental concerns, and the preservation of traditional values. By examining the dynamic interplay of tradition and modernity, this paper underscores the festival's relevance in contemporary society and its potential for future sustainability.*

**Keywords:** Marbat Festival, Nagpur, cultural identity, community bonding, social protest, regional heritage

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### **Introduction :**

Festivals play a crucial role in shaping the cultural identity and communal life of a region. Nagpur is famous for the Marbat that leaves Nagpur on the second day of Pola and Ganesh Utsav in Nagpur, in which the festival of Maskara Ganpati is held only in Nagpur<sup>1</sup>. In Nagpur, the **Marbat Festival** is a unique tradition that has historically served as both a social event and a form of protest. Over time, Marbat has evolved into a powerful means of social expression, reinforcing **Nagpur's cultural identity and strengthening community bonds**.

### **Historical Background of Marbat :**

The word "Marbat" refers to the effigies of female figures made from clay and hay, representing negative forces or social evils<sup>2</sup>. The **Marbat Festival** dates back to 1885, a period when British colonial rule heavily influenced local traditions<sup>3</sup>. The Tarhane Teli caste is credited for the beginning of this festival. The purpose was simple to protest against the British Raj, to spread awareness among people & bring social harmony. During this time, communities in Nagpur created large effigies known as **Kali Marbat** (Black Marbat) and **Pivli Marbat** (Yellow Marbat) to represent undesirable figures or issues they wanted to criticize. Historically the Kali marbat is older than the Pili Marbat. These effigies were paraded through the streets before being burned, symbolizing the **elimination of negativity** from society.

Over time, the festival expanded beyond its **anti-colonial** roots. It became a broader



**social critique**, allowing people to voice their concerns about corruption, moral decay, and contemporary political issues. The **Marbat Festival's evolution** demonstrates how traditions can serve as tools for resistance, community bonding, and identity formation.

### **Cultural Significance of Marbat :**

Marbat is not merely a festival; it is a **symbolic expression of collective sentiment**. Its rituals and processions serve several cultural purposes:

#### **1. Symbolism and Social Commentary :**

The effigies represent issues that the community seeks to address, including corruption, social injustice, and political failures. By showcasing this, they try to eradicate this by burning effigies. Each year, new figures are introduced, reflecting current socio-political concerns, making the festival dynamic and relevant.

#### **2. Rituals and Processions :**

The festival is marked by **grand processions**, accompanied by traditional **music, dance, and enthusiastic public participation**. The chant that accompanies the procession – ‘*Ida, pida gheun jaa ge Marbat*’ (Take away social evils and human miseries)<sup>5</sup> making Marbat a **unique form of public expression & gathering**. The **burning of the effigies** symbolizes purification by eradication, signifying a fresh start for the community & bringing social harmony to the society. Badgya tradition is of a recent origin and probably started just a few decades ago. Badgya tradition was started by children who made it using paper, tree twigs, household waste, etc<sup>6</sup>. Smaller effigies of animals or other symbolic figures, known as “badgyas,” are also made and included in the processions.

#### **3. Artistic and Creative Expression :**

When it was started, only female effigies were made from bamboo and paper. But now the **local artisans and craftsmen** play a vital role in designing and constructing the **Marbat effigies**. The festival serves as a **platform for artistic expression & development over a period of time**, allowing creativity to merge with social issues.

### **Marbat and Community Participation :**

One of the most significant aspects of the Marbat Festival is its ability to **bring together diverse communities** in Nagpur. This festival fosters a strong sense of belonging through **various forms of community participation**:

#### **1. Involvement of Different Communities :**

While initially associated with the **Teli community**, Marbat is now celebrated by people of **various castes and religious backgrounds**. Hence, it can be seen as a medium of communication to bridge the gap between religions & bring unity among all. This inclusivity strengthens **Nagpur's diverse social fabric** and reinforces **communal harmony**.

#### **2. Intergenerational Engagement :**

Older generations pass down stories, traditions, and values, ensuring the continuity of



cultural heritage. Children and youth actively participate, learning about their city's unique customs and history. Hence, it is also seen as a spirit of the older and new generation to continue this festival with the fusion of tradition mixing with modernity.

### **3. Economic Impact and Local Businesses :**

The festival boosts local businesses, as vendors, artisans, and performers benefit from increased demand for decorations, materials, and food. This economic activity supports small-scale industries and keeps local craftsmanship alive. It means, it is also a part of livelihood.

### **Marbat as a Marker of Regional Identity :**

The Marbat Festival is a crucial marker of **Nagpur's regional identity**, distinguishing it from other cities in Maharashtra and India. The festival reinforces Nagpur's distinct cultural landscape through the following ways:

#### **1. Expression of Regional Distinctiveness :**

Unlike mainstream Hindu festivals, Marbat is **unique to Nagpur**, making it an essential part of the city's **cultural heritage**. It reflects the **historical resilience** of Nagpur's people against oppression. Their awareness about the contemporary issues and preparedness to fight against it.

#### **2. Political and Social Dimensions :**

Over the years, Marbat has served as a **platform for raising awareness about political and social issues**. From Colonial rule to till date, this festival has been celebrated at its core. Political parties and activists sometimes use the festival to connect with the public and highlight pressing concerns.

#### **3. Strengthening Civic Engagement :**

By allowing citizens to openly express their frustrations and critique authority figures, the festival promotes **civic consciousness**. Their awareness about their rights is displayed by this. The event encourages people to engage in **social and political discourse**, reinforcing their role in governance.

### **Challenges and Contemporary Relevance :**

Despite its historical and cultural significance, the **Marbat Festival faces several challenges** that threaten its traditional essence:

#### **1. Commercialization and Political Influence :**

- Increasing **commercial sponsorships** and **political agendas** have shifted focus away from grassroots participation.
- The **original spirit of community expression** sometimes gets overshadowed by political symbolism.

## 2. Environmental Concerns

- The **burning of effigies** contributes to **air pollution** and environmental concerns.
- Recent efforts have focused on **eco-friendly materials** to reduce the festival's ecological impact.

## 3. Preserving Traditional Values

- Modern entertainment and social media influence have altered how young people perceive the festival.
- Educating younger generations about **Marbat's historical and cultural importance** is crucial to **preserving its authenticity**.

## Conclusion :

The Marbat Festival is **more than just an annual celebration**; it is a **reflection of Nagpur's identity, history, and community spirit**. Through its **unique traditions, social expression, and communal participation**, Marbat has played a pivotal role in shaping Nagpur's **cultural landscape**.

Despite modern challenges, the festival remains a **symbol of resilience and unity** for Nagpur's people. By **embracing sustainable practices and preserving its core values**, Marbat can continue to be an integral part of **Nagpur's heritage** for generations to come.

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