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## Sacred Stages: Traditional Ritual Theatres of India

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### Key Takeaways

- **Cultural Significance:** Ritual theatres like Kutiyattam, Mudi yettu, Ramman, and Ramlila blend sacred rituals with performance, preserving India's spiritual and cultural heritage.
- **Community Involvement:** These traditions thrive on collective participation—villagers act, sing, make costumes, and perform rituals—strengthening social cohesion and identity.
- **Transmission & Tradition:** Knowledge is passed through oral traditions and apprenticeship (guru-shishya), ensuring continuity across generations.
- **UNESCO Recognition:** Inclusion in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list has raised global awareness, secured institutional support, and highlighted the need for preservation while safeguarding authenticity.

### Introduction

**Ritual theatre** refers to a form of performance that **combines sacred rituals with dramatic expression, typically performed in temples or community spaces, and is deeply rooted in religious festivals and collective memory.**

Traditional theatre performances typically blend acting, singing, dance, music, dialogue, narration, and recitation. At times, they may also incorporate elements such as puppetry or pantomime. These arts, however, are more than simply 'performances' for an audience; they may also play crucial roles in culture and society.<sup>1</sup>

These rich traditions of ritual theatre, which are deeply woven into the fabric of community life through religious festivals and collective memory, are not just performances; they are living expressions of culture passed down through generations. It is precisely because of their crucial role in culture and society, and their nature as living traditions, that international bodies like UNESCO recognise them as Intangible Cultural Heritage, a designation that acknowledges their value to

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<sup>1</sup><https://ich.unesco.org/en/performing-arts-00054>

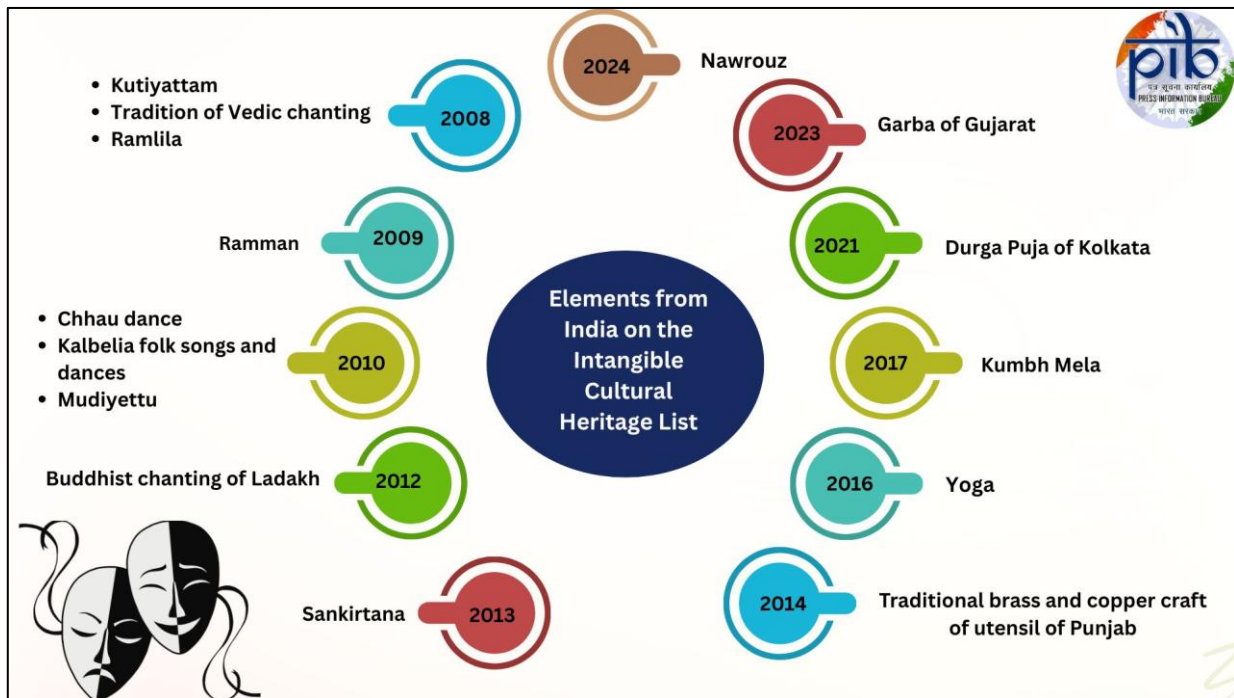
humanity and encourages their safeguarding for the future.



## Intangible Cultural Heritage

It is both traditional and contemporary, encompassing inherited traditions as well as current rural and urban practices. It is inclusive, shared across communities and evolving through generations, giving people identity, continuity, and social cohesion. It is representative, valued not for exclusivity but for its role in communities, sustained by knowledge and skills passed on over time. Presently, 15 elements

of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) have been inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List, granting them international recognition and a global platform.



UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines five broad domains of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH):

1. Oral Traditions & Expressions Including Language as a Vehicle of the Intangible Cultural Heritage
2. Performing Arts
3. Social Practices, Rituals & Festive Events
4. Knowledge & Practices Concerning Nature & the Universe
5. Traditional Craftsmanship

### Indian Ritual Theatres in the ICH list

Recognising the cultural value of these living traditions, UNESCO has inscribed **Kutiyattam, Mudi yettu, Ramman and Ramlila** ritual theatre forms on its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Notably, there are **shared themes across ritual theatres like Divine Storytelling, Sacred Space, Community Participation, Transmission of Knowledge & Values and Fusion of Art Forms.**



## Kutiyattam

Kutiyattam, practiced in Kerala, is one of India's oldest surviving theatrical traditions, **dating back over 2,000 years**. Blending **Sanskrit classicism** with Kerala's local traditions, it uses a codified language of eye expressions (*neta abhinaya*) and hand gestures (*hasta abhinaya*) to explore a character's emotions and thoughts. Performers undergo 10–15 years of



rigorous training to master techniques such as breath control and subtle muscle movements, allowing them to elaborate on a single episode for days, with full performances lasting up to 40 days.

Traditionally staged in temple theatres (*kuttampalams*), the art form retains its sacred character through rituals and the **symbolic presence of a lamp on stage**. Today, efforts by various cultural bodies aim to preserve and sustain this unique Sanskrit theatre tradition.<sup>2</sup>

**Divine Storytelling:** Though classical, Kuttiyatam adapts mythological stories and narratives drawn from Sanskrit drama, integrating legendary and devotional elements.<sup>3</sup>

**Sacred Space:** Performed in kuttampalams—temple theatre halls—attaching the performance to sacred architecture and ritual contexts.<sup>4</sup>

**Community Participation:** Though more specialized, communities around temple theatres support and maintain the art; local patronage and ritual audiences are critical.<sup>5</sup>

Community engagement is not spectator only. The local ownership, collective labour, and social cohesion underlie Kuttiyatam.

**Transmission of Knowledge & Values:** Training is rigorous and long. The artistes undergo years of practice in expression, gesture, voice modulation, and ritual discipline.

These ritual theatres sustain ethical, cultural, and aesthetic values across time via embodied learning and mentorship.

**Fusion of Art Forms:** A syncretic classical theatre blending Sanskrit drama, 'abhinaya' techniques, recitation, music, and stylized acting.

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<sup>2</sup><https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/kutiyattam-sanskrit-theatre-00010>

<sup>3</sup>[https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/kutiyattam-sanskrit-theatre-00010?utm\\_source](https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/kutiyattam-sanskrit-theatre-00010?utm_source)

<sup>4</sup><https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/kutiyattam-sanskrit-theatre-00010>

<sup>5</sup><https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/kutiyattam-sanskrit-theatre-00010>

## Mudiyettu



Mudiyettu is a **ritual dance-drama of Kerala** depicting the mythological battle between goddess Kali and the demon Darika. Performed annually in *Bhagavati Kavus* after the harvest, it begins with purification rituals and the drawing of a sacred *kalam* of Kali. The **performance involves the entire village,**

**with each caste contributing, reinforcing community identity and cooperation.** Elders transmit the tradition by training younger apprentices, ensuring the continuity of cultural values, ethics, and aesthetic practices across generations.<sup>6</sup>

**Divine Storytelling:** Revolves around the battle between Goddess Kali and Darika, invoking divine conflict and triumph.

**Sacred Space:** Performed in *Bhagavati kavus* (temple precincts), preceded by kalamezhuthu (ritual drawing of goddess image) and invocation ceremonies.

**Community Participation:** All castes contribute—mask makers, costume providers, performers, and ritual participants.

**Transmission of Knowledge & Values:** Elders pass on ritual timings, chants, sequences, and kalamezhuthu designs through apprenticeships.

**Fusion of Art Forms:** Integrates dance, music, visual art (ritual drawings), masks, costumes, and drama into a unified sacred performance.

## Ramman

Ramman is an annual religious festival celebrated in late April in the twin villages of Saloor-Dungra, Uttarakhand, **in honour of the local deity Bhumiya Devta**. It features complex rituals, recitations of the Ramayana, songs, and masked dances, with each caste and group playing distinct roles. Some of the instruments documented include:



- **Dhol** (a type of drum)
- **Damau** (smaller percussion drum)
- **Manjira** (small hand cymbals)
- **Jhanjhar** (larger cymbals)

<sup>6</sup><https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/mudiyettu-ritual-theatre-and-dance-drama-of-kerala-00345>

- **Bhankora** (a kind of trumpet)

These instruments help accompany chants, dances, and storytelling segments during the performances.

Combining theatre, music, oral traditions, and historical reconstructions, the festival embodies the community's spiritual and cultural identity while reinforcing social cohesion. To ensure its continuity, the community emphasizes intergenerational transmission and seeks recognition beyond its region.



**Divine Storytelling:** The performances include recitations of the *Rama Katha* (episodes from the Ramayana), combined with masked dances of deities and local legends, blending mythic and local narrative layers.<sup>7</sup>

**Sacred Space:** Held in the courtyard of the Bhumiya Devta temple in Saloor Dungra, the theatre is embedded in a sacred precinct and linked tightly to the village deity.<sup>8</sup>

**Community Participation:** Entire village households contribute: roles are caste-based (priests, mask-makers, drum players), funding comes from the village, and participation spans elders to youth.<sup>9 10</sup>

**Transmission of Knowledge & Values:** Oral transmission of epic songs, dance forms, and ritual lore across generations. Younger villagers learn by apprenticeship and community observation.<sup>11</sup>

**Fusion of Art Forms:** Blends narration, masked dances, ritual drama, music, and mask craft into one integrated festival.

<sup>7</sup>[Ramman, religious festival and ritual theatre of the Garhwal Himalayas, India - UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage](https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/ramman-religious-festival-and-ritual-theatre-of-the-garhwal-himalayas-india-00281)

<sup>8</sup><https://culture.gov.in/intangible-cultural-heritage>

<sup>9</sup>[https://indiaich-sna.in/node/1050?utm\\_source](https://indiaich-sna.in/node/1050?utm_source)

<sup>10</sup><https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/ramman-religious-festival-and-ritual-theatre-of-the-garhwal-himalayas-india-00281>

<sup>11</sup><https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/ramman-religious-festival-and-ritual-theatre-of-the-garhwal-himalayas-india-00281>



## Ramlila

Ramlila, literally meaning “Rama’s play,” is a dramatic re-enactment of the Ramayana epic, performed through a sequence of scenes that combine song, narration,



recitation, and dialogue. Traditionally staged across northern India during the autumn festival of Dussehra, Ramlila follows the ritual calendar and varies in scale and duration. Some of the most renowned Ramlilas are staged in Ayodhya (birthplace of Lord Ram), Ramnagar, Varanasi, Vrindavan, Almora, Satna, and Madhubani.

The performances are largely based on the *Ramcharitmanas*—a sixteenth-century devotional text composed by the poet-saint Tulsidas in Hindi to make the Sanskrit epic accessible to wider audiences. Most Ramlilas span 10 -12 days, though some, such as the famous month-long Ramnagar staging, extend much longer. These festivals, held across numerous towns and villages, commemorate Rama’s return from exile and his battle with Ravana.

**Divine Storytelling:** This theatre tradition directly enacts the *Ramayana*, dramatizing the life and deeds of Lord Rama, thus embedding devotional storytelling at its core.<sup>12</sup>

**Sacred Space:** Often staged in temple grounds, public squares, or open courtyards, aligning performance space with sacred or public communal arenas.<sup>13</sup>

**Community Participation:** Local communities organize, fund, perform, and attend Ramlila events annually. Participation is from amateur actors drawn from the community.<sup>14</sup>



**Transmission of Knowledge & Values:** Through annual recitation and enactment, values of righteousness, devotion, loyalty, and cultural memory are passed down.

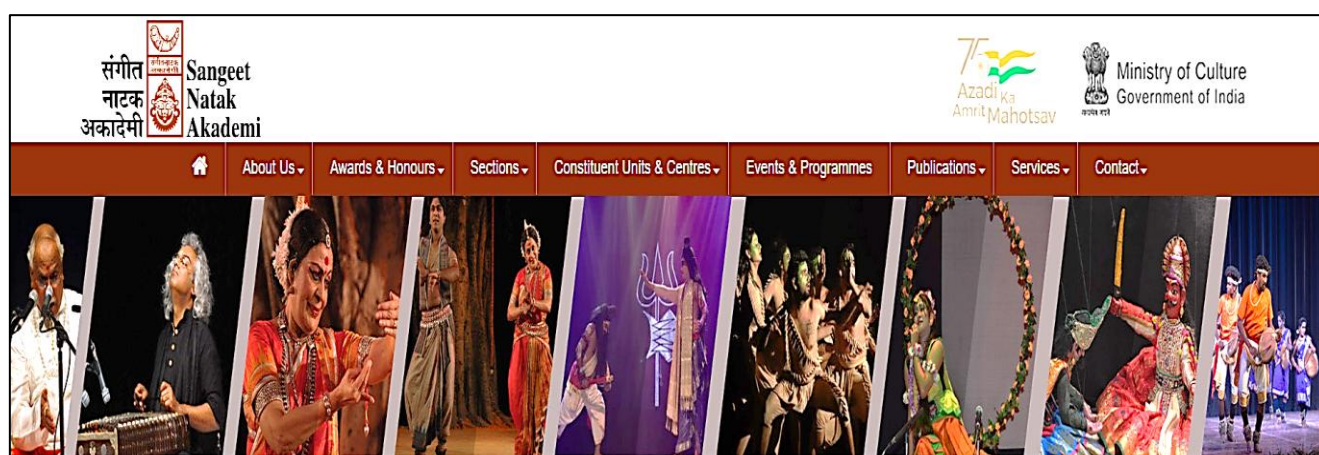
**Fusion of Art Forms:** Combines narrative drama, music, choreography, stagecraft, dialogue, and costumes to dramatize the Ramayana.

<sup>12</sup><https://www.indiaculture.gov.in/national-list-intangible-cultural-heritage-ich>

<sup>13</sup><https://www.indiaculture.gov.in/national-list-intangible-cultural-heritage-ich>

<sup>14</sup><https://www.indiaculture.gov.in/national-list-intangible-cultural-heritage-ich>

## Role of Sangeet Natak Akademi



Sangeet Natak Akademi, **the apex body in the field of performing arts** in the country, was set up in 1953 for the preservation and promotion of the vast intangible heritage of India's diverse culture expressed in forms of music, dance and drama. This institution acts as **a guardian of India's living heritage**, blending tradition with modern preservation techniques to keep the ritual theatres vibrant through:

- **Documentation and Archiving:** Sangeet Natak Akademi meticulously documents ICH through audio-visual recordings, manuscripts, and publications. This effort is part of its mandate to maintain a national archive, accessible via its website and reports (e.g., <https://sangeetnatak.gov.in/public/uploads/reports/16409317172892.pdf>).
- **Training and Capacity Building:** Through its guru-shishya parampara (teacher-disciple tradition) initiatives, SANGEET NATAK AKADEMI supports apprenticeship programs. It organizes workshops and training camps, to pass down skills from master artistes to younger learners.
- **Awards and Recognition:** Sangeet Natak Akademi honours living legends through awards like the Sangeet Natak Akademi Awards, Fellowships, and Ustad Bismillah Khan Yuva Puraskar.<sup>15</sup>
- **Research and Publication:** The Akademi conducts research and publishes books, journals, and monographs on ICH. These resources are available through its library and online portals.
- **Festivals and Performances:** It organizes national and regional festivals, such as the National Theatre Festival and Dance Festival, to showcase ICH forms. These events, listed on <https://sangeetnatak.gov.in/>, boost visibility, attract audiences, and provide platforms for artistes.
- **Collaboration with UNESCO and State Bodies:** As part of India's National ICH List process, Sangeet Natak Akademi collaborates with UNESCO to nominate and protect forms like Kutiyattam (inscribed 2008). It also works with state governments, like Uttarakhand for Ramman, to ensure local support and funding.

<sup>15</sup><https://sangeetnatak.gov.in/public/uploads/reports/16409317172892.pdf>



- **Support for Artistes and Patronage:** Sangeet Natak Akademi provides stipends, grants, and infrastructure support to artistes, addressing challenges like the high costs of costumes and training.



## Conclusion

In the heart of India's diverse landscapes, these ritual theatres stand as timeless bridges between the divine and the everyday, weaving myth, music, and movement into the very soul of communities. From the intricate gestures of Kutiyattam in Kerala's temple halls to the vibrant communal dances of Ramman in the Garhwal Himalayas, they remind us that culture is not static but a living pulse, nurtured through shared participation, sacred spaces, and generations of apprenticeship.

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