

2. Traditional Ritual Theatres of India – Art & Culture

India's ritual theatres are living cultural traditions that connect the divine and daily life through myth, music, and community participation.

Ritual Theatre – An Overview

Definition and Significance – Ritual theatre is a traditional form of performance that integrates sacred rituals with dramatic elements such as acting, music, dance, and narration. These performances often take place during religious festivals and carry forward collective memories of communities.

Cultural Role – Beyond entertainment, ritual theatre preserves cultural identity, strengthens social cohesion, and ensures intergenerational continuity of traditional practices.

UNESCO Recognition – UNESCO recognizes such practices as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of humanity, emphasizing their protection, preservation, and transmission.

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)

Definition – ICH encompasses traditional and evolving practices shared across generations within communities.

UNESCO's Five Domains of ICH –

1. Oral traditions and language
2. Performing arts
3. Social practices, rituals, and festive events
4. Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe
5. Traditional craftsmanship

Global Recognition – Currently, 15 elements of ICH from India have been inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List, offering international recognition and a global platform for these cultural expressions.

Indian Ritual Theatres Inscribed in UNESCO's ICH List

1. Kutiyattam (Kerala)

Origin – One of India's oldest surviving theatrical traditions, over 2,000 years old.

Characteristics – Kerala's Sanskrit theatre tradition combines classical drama with local rituals, using intricate eye and hand gestures (mudras) to convey deep emotions.

Performance Setting – Traditionally performed in temple theatres (kuttampalams) and retains a sacred character.

Training – Involves intensive training of 10–15 years.

Significance – Fuses drama, music, and stylized acting, preserving ethical and aesthetic values across generations.

2. Mudiattu (Kerala)

Theme – Enacts the mythological battle between Goddess Kali and demon Darika.

Timing – Performed annually in temple precincts (Bhagavati Kavus) after the harvest.

Ritual Elements – Incorporates sacred rituals like kalamezhuthu (ritual floor drawing) and invocations.

Community Involvement – Engages all castes and local artisans—mask makers, performers, and musicians—fostering social cohesion.

Artistic Blend – Integrates dance, music, visual art, and drama, forming a vibrant community-driven sacred performance.

3. Ramman (Uttarakhand)

Celebration – Annual religious festival in Saloor-Dungra villages, honoring the local deity Bhumiyaal Devta.

Activities – Features complex rituals, recitations from the Ramayana, masked dances, and songs.

Roles – Each caste and community group performs distinct roles, preserving traditional social hierarchies and responsibilities.

Musical Instruments – Includes Dhol, Damau, Manjira, Jhanjhar, and Bhankora.

4. Ramlila (Northern India)

Meaning - Literally "Rama's play," a dramatic re-enactment of the Ramayana epic.

Performance - Combines song, narration, recitation, and dialogue across sequential scenes.

Timing - Traditionally staged during Dussehra, following a ritual calendar.

Renowned Venues - Famous Ramlilas are staged in Ayodhya, Ramnagar, Varanasi, Vrindavan, Almora, Satna, and Madhubani.

Role of Sangeet Natak Akademi

Establishment - Founded in 1953 as the apex body for performing arts in India.

Mandate - Preservation and promotion of India's diverse intangible heritage, expressed in music, dance, and drama.

Functions - Acts as a guardian of India's living heritage, blending traditional practices with modern preservation techniques to keep ritual theatres active and relevant.

Importance of Ritual Theatre

Cultural Preservation - Ensures that traditional knowledge, ethical values, and local narratives are passed down generations.

Social Cohesion - Promotes collaboration among community members and sustains village-level participation.

Economic Potential - Supports traditional artisans, performers, and local economies through tourism and cultural initiatives.

Global Recognition - UNESCO inscription not only protects the art form but also facilitates global awareness, funding, and preservation efforts.

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