

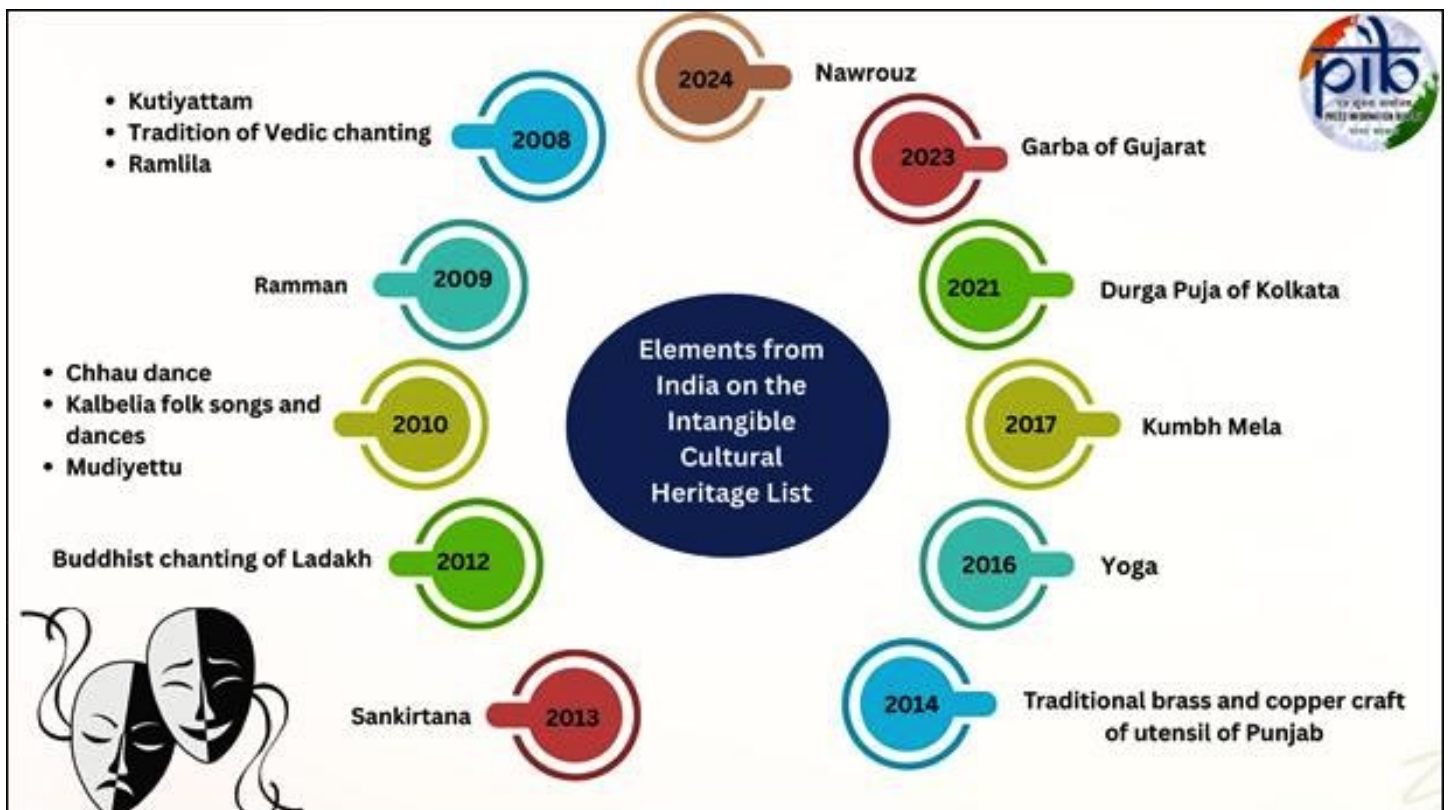
Sacred Stages: Traditional Ritual Theatres of India

Basics

- **Ritual Theatre:** A form of performance combining sacred ritual and dramatic expression, rooted in temples, festivals, and collective memory.
- **Core Features:** Acting, singing, dance, music, narration, puppetry/pantomime. Beyond entertainment → cultural, ethical, spiritual functions.
- **UNESCO Recognition:** Classified as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) for their role in identity, continuity, and social cohesion.
- **ICH in India:** 15 elements inscribed in UNESCO list; ritual theatres inscribed include **Kutiyattam, Mudi yettu, Ramman, Ramlila**.

Relevance

- **GS-1 (Art & Culture):** Indian theatre traditions, UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage, role of community in cultural preservation.
- **GS-2 (Governance):** Role of institutions (Sangeet Natak Akademi, UNESCO collaboration), cultural policy, safeguarding heritage.
- **GS-3 (Economy, Tourism, Social Development):** Cultural industries, heritage-based tourism, livelihood generation through traditional arts.



UNESCO's Framework of ICH

Five domains under the **Convention for Safeguarding ICH**:

1. Oral Traditions & Expressions (including language).
2. Performing Arts.
3. Social Practices, Rituals & Festive Events.
4. Knowledge & Practices Concerning Nature & the Universe.
5. Traditional Craftsmanship.

Key Ritual Theatres of India

1. Kutiyattam (Kerala)

- 2000-year-old Sanskrit theatre tradition blending classical + local elements.
- Features: *Abhinaya* (eye-hand expressions), long training (10–15 years), performances up to 40 days.
- Sacred space: *Kuttampalams* (temple theatres).
- Themes: Mythology, Sanskrit dramas.
- Community role: Patronage around temples, ritual audiences.
- UNESCO ICH: Inscribed in 2008.

2. Mudi yettu (Kerala)

- Ritual dance-drama depicting Kali vs Darika.
- Performed annually in **Bhagavati Kavus** post-harvest.
- Rituals: Purification, drawing of *kalam* (image of goddess).
- Entire village participation: cross-caste roles (mask-making, costumes, performers).
- Transmission: Oral apprenticeship.
- Fusion: Dance, music, visual arts, masks.

3. Ramman (Uttarakhand)

- Annual festival (April) in Saloor-Dungra villages for deity Bhumiya Devta.
- Features: Ramayana recitations, masked dances, local legends, ritual theatre.
- Sacred space: Temple courtyard.
- Instruments: *Dhol*, *Damau*, *Manjira*, *Jhanjhar*, *Bhankora*.
- Strong caste/community-based role division; collective funding.
- Transmission: Oral, apprenticeship.

4. Ramlila (North India)

- Dramatic enactment of the *Ramcharitmanas* by Tulsidas.
- Major during Dussehra (Ayodhya, Ramnagar, Varanasi, Vrindavan, etc.).
- Duration: 10–12 days (Ramnagar version = 1 month).
- Performed in temple grounds/public squares.

- Amateur actors from community → values of *dharma*, *bhakti*, *social cohesion*.

Thematic Commonalities

- **Divine Storytelling:** Mythological epics (Ramayana, Kali legends, Sanskrit dramas).
- **Sacred Space:** Temple halls, courtyards, ritual precincts.
- **Community Participation:** Collective labour, caste-based roles, village patronage.
- **Transmission of Knowledge:** Oral, guru-shishya parampara, long apprenticeships.
- **Fusion of Art Forms:** Drama, music, dance, ritual, masks, puppetry, visual arts.

Institutional Role - Sangeet Natak Akademi

- **Established:** 1953; apex body for performing arts.
- **Functions:**
 - Documentation & Archiving (audio-visuals, manuscripts, national archive).
 - Training (guru-shishya programs, workshops, capacity building).
 - Awards (SNA Awards, Fellowships, Ustad Bismillah Khan Yuva Puraskar).
 - Research & Publications (books, journals, monographs).
 - Festivals (National Theatre Festival, Dance Festivals).
 - Collaboration with UNESCO & States (ICH nominations, state funding).
 - Support to Artistes (stipends, grants, costume/training aid).

Overview

- **Cultural Identity:** Rooted in communities, reinforcing shared memory & ethics.
- **Social Cohesion:** Collective participation across caste, class, gender.
- **Heritage Conservation:** UNESCO + state efforts safeguard ICH against decline.
- **Challenges:** Declining patronage, urban migration, commercialization, high costs of costumes/training.
- **Opportunities:**
 - Linking ICH with tourism (cultural circuits).
 - Using digital platforms for wider archiving & outreach.
 - Strengthening community-driven preservation.
 - Expanding ICH education in schools/HEIs for intergenerational transfer.

Conclusion

- Ritual theatres like Kutiyattam, Mudi yettu, Ramman, and Ramlila are **living embodiments of India's sacred traditions**, not static relics.
- They serve as **bridges between the divine and the everyday**, sustaining continuity through community effort and ritual practice.

- Preserving them ensures not only cultural pride but also **India's contribution to global heritage safeguarding**.

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