



Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of India

For Prelims: [Intangible cultural heritage](#), [UNESCO](#), [Performing arts](#), [Kutiyattam](#), [Ramlila](#), [Ramman](#), [Chhau Dance](#), [Kalbelia](#), [Mudiyettu](#), [Sankirtana](#), [Nawrouz](#), [Yoga](#), [Kumbh Mela](#), [Garhwal Himalayas](#), [Kuttampalams](#), [Ramcharitmanas](#), [Tulsidas](#), [Martial Practices](#), [Bhagavati Kavus](#), [Mahayana Buddhism](#), [Vajrayana Buddhism](#), [Mudras](#), [Vaishnavism](#), [Durga Puja](#), [Garba](#)

For Mains: Significance of Intangible Cultural Heritage and Need for It's Conservation.

What is Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)?

- **Intangible cultural heritage** means the **practices, representations, expressions, knowledge** and **skills** that communities, groups and individuals recognize as a part of their **cultural heritage**.
- It also includes **instruments, objects, artifacts** and **cultural spaces** associated with such heritage.
- ICH ensures that cultural heritage does not end at **monuments** and collections of objects. It also includes **traditions or living expressions**.

What are the Domains in Which Intangible Cultural Heritage is Manifested?

- According to **UNESCO's** 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, ICH is manifested into **five broad domains**:
 - **Oral traditions** and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage.
 - **Performing arts**
 - **Social practices**, rituals and festive events
 - **Knowledge and practices** concerning nature and the universe
 - Traditional **craftsmanship**

What is the Intangible Cultural Heritage of India?

- With the recent inscription of **Garba of Gujarat (2023)** on the Representative List of ICH of Humanity, India now has **15 intangible cultural heritage elements** on the prestigious UNESCO's Representative List of ICH of Humanity.
- List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of India:

| S.No. | Intangible Cultural Heritage Element | Year of Inscription |
|-------|---|---------------------|
| 1. | Kutiyattam, Sanskrit Theater | 2008 |
| 2. | Tradition of Vedic Chanting | 2008 |
| 3. | Ramlila, the Traditional Performance of the Ramayana | 2008 |
| 4. | Ramman, Religious Festival and Ritual Theatre of the Garhwal Himalayas, India | 2009 |

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| 5. | Chhau Dance | 2010 |
| 6. | Kalbelia Folk Songs and Dances of Rajasthan | 2010 |
| 7. | Mudiyettu, Ritual Theatre and Dance Drama of Kerala | 2010 |
| 8. | Buddhist Chanting of Ladakh: Recitation of Sacred Buddhist Texts in the Trans-Himalayan Ladakh region, Jammu and Kashmir, India | 2012 |
| 9. | Sankirtana, ritual singing, drumming and dancing of Manipur | 2013 |
| 10. | Traditional Brass and Copper Craft of Utensil Making among the Thatheras of Jandiala Guru, Punjab, India | 2014 |
| 11. | Nowruz | 2016 |
| 12. | Yoga | 2016 |
| 13. | Kumbh Mela | 2017 |
| 14. | Durga Puja in Kolkata | 2021 |
| 15. | Garba of Gujarat | 2023 |

▪ **Kutiyattam (Kerala):**

- It is one of India's oldest **living theatrical** traditions.
- It represents a synthesis of **Sanskrit classicism** and reflects the **local traditions** of Kerala.
- In its stylized and codified theatrical language, **netra abhinaya (eye expression)** and **hasta abhinaya (the language of gestures)** are prominent. They focus on the **thoughts** and **feelings** of the main character.
- A single act may take days to perform and a **complete performance** may last up to 40 days.
- It is traditionally performed in theaters called **Kuttampalams**, which are located in **Hindu temples**.



▪ **Tradition of Vedic Chanting (India):**

- The **Vedas** comprise a vast corpus of **Sanskrit poetry, philosophical dialogue, myth,** and **ritual incantations** developed and composed over 3500 years ago.
- The Vedas embody one of the **world's oldest surviving** cultural traditions.
- The Vedic heritage embraces a multitude of texts and interpretations collected in four Vedas, commonly referred to as **"Books of Knowledge"** even though they have been **transmitted orally**.

- The value of this tradition lies not only in the **rich content** of its **oral literature** but also in the **ingenious techniques** employed by the Brahmin priests in **preserving** the **texts** intact over thousands of years.
- Although the Vedas continue to play an important role in contemporary Indian life, **only thirteen** of the over one thousand Vedic recitation branches have **survived**.



▪ **Ramlila (North India):**

- Ramlila, literally **“Rama’s play”**, is a performance of **Ramayana epic** in a series of scenes that include **song, narration, recital** and **dialogue**.
- It recalls the **battle** between **Rama and Ravana** and consists of a series of dialogues between gods, sages and the faithful.
- It is performed across **northern India** during the festival of **Dussehra**.
- The most representative Ramlilas are those of **Ayodhya, Ramnagar** and **Benares, Vrindavan, Almora, Sattna** and **Madhubani**.
- This staging of the Ramayana is based on the **Ramcharitmanas** which was composed by **Tulsidas** in the 16th century AD.



▪ **Ramman (Uttarakhand):**

- It is celebrated in the **twin villages** of [Saloor-Dungra](#) in Uttarakhand every year in late April.
- It is a religious festival in honor of the tutelary god, **Bhumiya Devta**.
- This event is made up of highly **complex rituals**. It includes the **recitation** of a version of the **epic of Rama** and various legends, and the performance of **songs and masked dances**.
- **Bhandaris**, representing locals of the [Kshatriya caste](#), are alone entitled to wear one of the most sacred masks, that of the half-man, half-lion Hindu deity, Narasimha.



▪ **Chhau Dance (Eastern India):**

- [Chhau dance](#) enacts episodes from epics including the [Mahabharata](#) and [Ramayana](#), local folklore and abstract themes.
- Its **three distinct styles** hail from the regions of [Seraikeella](#) (Jharkhand), [Purulia](#) (West

Bengal) and **Mayurbhanj (Odisha)**, the first two using masks.

- Its **origin** is traceable to **indigenous** forms of **dance and martial practices**.
- Its movement includes mock **combat techniques, stylized gaits of birds** and **animals** and movements modeled on the chores of **village housewives**.
- The dance is performed at night in an open space to traditional and folk melodies, played on the reed pipes mohuri and shehnai.



▪ **Kalbelia Folk Songs and Dances (Rajasthan):**

- Songs and dances are an expression of the **Kalbelia** community's traditional way of life.
- Kalbelia were once professional **snake handlers**. Today, they evoke their former occupation in music and dance that is evolving in new and creative ways.
- **Women** in flowing **black skirts dance and swirl**, replicating the movements of a serpent, while men accompany them on the **khanjari percussion** instrument and the poongi, a woodwind instrument traditionally played to capture snakes.
- The dancers wear traditional **tattoo designs, jewellery** and **garments** richly embroidered with small mirrors and **silver thread**.
- The songs also demonstrate the **poetic acumen** of the Kalbelia, who are reputed to compose lyrics spontaneously and improvise songs during performances.
- Transmitted from generation to generation, the songs and dances form part of an oral tradition for which **no texts or training manuals** exist.



▪ **Mudi yettu (Kerala):**

- **Mudi yettu** is a ritual dance drama from Kerala based on the mythological tale of a battle between the **goddess Kali** and the **demon Darika**.
- Mudi yettu performers draw a **huge image** of goddess Kali, called as kalam, on the temple floor with coloured powders, wherein the spirit of the goddess is invoked.
- Performers enact the play in which the divine **sage Narada** importunes Shiva to contain the demon Darika, who is immune to defeat by mortals.
- Shiva instead commands that Darika will die at the hand of the goddess Kali.
- Mudi yettu is performed annually in '**Bhagavati Kavus**', the temples of the goddess, in different villages along the rivers **Chalakkudy Puzha**, **Periyar** and **Moovattupuzha**.



▪ **Buddhist Chanting (Ladakh):**

- In the monasteries and villages of the **Ladakh region**, [Buddhist lamas](#) (priests) chant sacred texts representing the **spirit, philosophy and teachings** of the Buddha.
- Two forms of Buddhism are practiced in Ladakh namely [Mahayana](#) and [Vajrayana](#) and there are **four major sects**, namely [Nyingma](#), [Kagyud](#), [Shakya](#) and [Geluk](#).
- Each sect has **several forms of chanting**, practiced during life-cycle rituals and on important days in the Buddhist and agrarian calendars.
- The monks wear **special costumes** and make hand gestures ([mudras](#)) representing the divine Buddha, and instruments such as **bells, drums, cymbals** and trumpets lend musicality and rhythm to the chanting.
- The chanting is performed in groups, either sitting indoors or accompanied by dance in [monastery courtyards](#) or private houses.



▪ **Sankirtana (Manipur):**

- **Sankirtana** encompasses ritual **singing, drumming** and **dancing** performed to mark religious occasions and various stages in the life of the **Vaishnava people** of the **Manipur plains**.
- Performers **narrate** the lives and deeds of **Krishna** through song and dance.
- In a typical performance, **two drummers** and about **ten singer-dancers** perform in a hall or domestic courtyard encircled by **seated devotees**.
- Sankirtana has two main **social functions**:
 - It brings people together on festive occasions acting as a **cohesive force** within Manipur's Vaishnava community.
 - It establishes and reinforces relationships between the individual and the community through **life-cycle ceremonies**.



▪ **Traditional Brass and Copper Craft of Utensil Making (Punjab):**

- The craft of the **Thatheras of Jandiala Guru** constitutes the traditional technique of manufacturing **brass and copper utensils** in Punjab.
- The process starts by obtaining **cooled metal cakes**, which are flattened into thin plates. These plates are then hammered into curved shapes to form small bowls, rimmed plates,

- larger pots for water and milk, **huge cooking vessels**, and other artifacts.
- Heating the plates while hammering and curving them into different shapes requires **careful temperature control**, which is achieved by using tiny **wood-fired stoves** (aided by hand-held bellows) buried in the earth.
 - Utensils are manually finished by polishing with traditional materials such as **sand and tamarind juice**.



▪ **Navroz (India):**

- **Navroz** is the **new year** celebrations for **Parsis (Zoroastrians)** and **Muslims** (both Shia and Sunni).
- It is celebrated on **21st March** every year in Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, India, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.
- An important tradition practiced during this time is the **gathering around 'the Table'**, decorated with objects that symbolize **purity, brightness, livelihood** and wealth, to enjoy a special meal with loved ones.



▪ **Yoga (India):**

- **Yoga** consists of a series of poses, **meditation**, **controlled breathing**, **word chanting** and other techniques designed to help individuals build **self-realization**, **ease any suffering** and allow for a **state of liberation**.
- It is based on **unifying** the mind with the **body** and soul to allow for greater mental, **spiritual** and **physical wellbeing**.
- Traditionally, yoga was transmitted using the Guru-Shishya model (master-pupil) with yoga gurus as the main custodians of associated knowledge and skills.



▪ **Kumbh Mela (North India):**

- **Kumbh Mela** (the festival of the **sacred pitcher**) is the largest **peaceful congregation** of pilgrims on earth, during which participants bathe or take a dip in a sacred river.
- The festival is held at **Allahabad, Haridwar, Ujjain** and **Nasik** every four years by rotation and is attended by millions of people irrespective of caste, creed or gender.
- Devotees believe that by bathing in the **Ganges** one is freed from sins liberating her/him from the **cycle of birth and death**.
- Its primary bearers, however, belong to **akhadas** and **ashrams, religious organizations**, or are individuals living on alms.



▪ **Durga Puja (Kolkata):**

- **Durga Puja** is an annual festival that marks the **ten-day worship** of the Hindu mother goddess **Durga**.
- The worship of the goddess then begins on the inaugural day of **Mahalaya**, when eyes are painted onto the clay images to bring the goddess to life.
- It ends on the **tenth day**, when the images are immersed in the river from where the clay came.
- Durga Puja is commended for its initiatives to involve **marginalized groups** and individuals as well as **women** in their participation in safeguarding the element.



▪ **Garba (Gujarat):**

- **Garba** is a ritualistic and devotional dance that is performed on the occasion of the Hindu festival of **Navratri**, which is dedicated to the worship of the feminine energy or 'Shakti'.
- The dance takes place around a **perforated earthenware pot** lit with an oil lamp, or an image of the mother goddess Amba.
- The dancers move around the center in a **counter-clockwise circle**, using simple movements while singing and clapping their hands in unison. Starting with slow circular movements, the tempo slowly builds up to a **frenzied whirling**.



Conclusion:

India has a vast basket of living and diverse cultural traditions, traditional expressions, intangible cultural heritage comprising masterpieces which need institutional support and encouragement with a view to addressing areas critical for the survival and propagation of these forms of cultural heritage. India needs to reinvigorate and revitalize various institutions, groups, individuals, non-government organizations, researchers and scholars so that they may engage in activities/ projects for strengthening, protecting, preserving and promoting the rich intangible cultural heritage of India.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

Prelims

Q1. With reference to the religious history of India, consider the following statements: (2020)

1. Sthaviravadins belong to Mahayana Buddhism
2. Lokottaravadin sect was an offshoot of the Mahasanghika sect of Buddhism
3. The deification of Buddha by Mahasanghikas fostered Mahayana Buddhism

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Q2. With reference to Manipuri Sankirtana, consider the following statements: (2017)

1. It is a song and dance performance
2. Cymbals are the only musical instruments used in the performance
3. It is performed to narrate the life and deeds of Lord Krishna

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1, 2 and 3
- (b) 1 and 3 only
- (c) 2 and 3 only
- (d) 1 only

Q3. With reference to India's culture and tradition, what is 'Kalaripayattu'? (2014)

- (a) It is an ancient Bhakti cult of Shaivism still prevalent in some parts of South India
- (b) It is an ancient style bronze and brass work still found in the southern part of the Coromandel area
- (c) It is an ancient form of dance-drama and a living tradition in the northern part of Malabar
- (d) It is an ancient martial art and a living tradition in some parts of South India

Mains

Q. Safeguarding the Indian art heritage is the need of the moment. Discuss (2018)