

Culture & Heritage in Odisha: Living Traditions in a Changing World

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Culture & Heritage

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"Folk traditions are not mere remnants of the past. They function as living cultural systems that sustain social identity, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and community cohesion." — Research on Odisha's Folk Culture, Traditions, and Contemporary Challenges, 2025

In Raghurajpur, a village ten kilometres from Puri on the banks of the Bhargabi river, every household is an artist's studio. The Chitrakaras — the painter-caste families who have lived here for generations — wake before dawn to prepare their natural pigments: the red from hingulal (cinnabar), the yellow from haritala (orpiment), the black from lamp soot, the white from conch shell. By mid-morning, the patta is stretched and the brush is moving. By evening, another Pattachitra painting exists in the world — one that did not exist twenty-four hours ago.

It will probably sell to a trader for ₹400. The same painting, in a Delhi gallery or on a German craft e-commerce platform, would fetch ₹4,000 to ₹40,000 depending on

scale and quality. The Chitrakara who created it will see none of that difference. She will see the ₹400, and she will wonder whether her daughter should learn to paint or whether there is a better future somewhere else.

That tension — between a living tradition of extraordinary depth and the economic conditions that make it increasingly difficult to sustain — is the central challenge of culture and heritage in Odisha. And it is a challenge that extends far beyond Pattachitra, across the full expanse of what Odisha has: Odissi dance and music; the Gotipua tradition and Chhau; Sambalpuri weaving and Bomkai; Dhokra metal casting; palm leaf engraving; Pipili appliqué; Tarakasi silver filigree; tribal music and oral literature across sixty-two communities; sacred groves and their associated rituals; and thousands of other living cultural practices that exist nowhere else in the world in the same form.

These are not museum pieces. They are alive. The question is whether they can remain so.

Part One: Odisha's Cultural Inheritance — The Scale of What Exists

Odisha is classified as a classical language state — Odia is one of India's six classical languages, recognised for its literary tradition stretching back over a millennium. Jayadeva's twelfth-century *Gita Govinda*, composed in Sanskrit and deeply woven into Odia cultural life, shaped not just literature but dance, music, and visual art across the subcontinent. The Jagannath tradition — the cosmic deity of Puri whose theological foundations draw simultaneously from tribal, Buddhist, Jain, Shaiva, Shakta, and Vaishnavite sources — is perhaps the most genuinely syncretic religious tradition in India, and its cultural expressions have shaped Pattachitra, Odissi, and festival life across the state for centuries.

At the classical level, Odisha holds:

Odissi dance — one of India's eight classical dance forms, codified in the twentieth century from temple traditions by gurus including Kelucharan Mohapatra, Sanjukta Panigrahi, and Deba Prasad Das. It is characterised by the tribhangi posture (three bends at head, torso, and lower body), fluid movements, elaborate costumes, and narrative sequences drawn primarily from the Gita Govinda. Odissi has a global community of practitioners — it is taught in conservatories from Tokyo to Toronto — yet its roots in Odisha's temple traditions and its guru-shishya pedagogy remain the living heart of the form.

Odissi music — a classical system over 2,500 years old, born as a seva (devotional service) in the Jagannath temple of Puri. It predates both Hindustani and Carnatic music in documented form and has its own distinct raga system, deeply influenced by Jayadeva's Ashtapadis and the compositions of Upendra Bhanja and Dinakrusna Dasa.

Chhau — a martial dance tradition from Mayurbhanj, inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (2010), that combines combat choreography, masked performance, and narrative drawn from the epics. It exists in three distinct regional styles: Seraikella, Purulia, and Mayurbhanj — each with its own aesthetic signature.

At the folk and tribal level, the range is extraordinary:

Gotipua — young boys trained in acrobatic dance in the tradition of the Devadasis, performed in temples and festivals. Raghurajpur is one of its surviving centres. The form predates and inspired Odissi.

Sambalpuri and Bomkai weaving — handloom textile traditions of western Odisha characterised by the ikkat dyeing technique (resist-dyeing of threads before weaving, creating intricate patterns that appear to blur at the edges). Sambalpuri is worn at the Odissi stage; it is also one of India's most distinctive luxury textile traditions.

Pala and Daskathia — oral narrative traditions involving musical recitation of mythological stories. Pala combines theatre, classical Odissi music, and highly refined

Odia poetry in a form that can last through the night. These are among Odisha's most endangered performance traditions.

Tribal cultural systems — across Odisha's 62 Scheduled Tribes, there are hundreds of distinct cultural practices: the Bonda's body adornment and marriage rituals; the Dongria Kondh's Dhemsa dance and sacred forest festivals; the Juang's oral cosmology; the Santal's Sohrae and Baha festivals; the Gond's Karma and Hareli traditions. These are not decorative externalities to tribal life — they are the frameworks through which communities understand their relationship with the natural world, manage social conflict, transmit ecological knowledge, and maintain collective identity.

This inheritance is simultaneously extraordinary and fragile. Research on Odisha's folk culture identifies three primary pressures: modernisation and urban migration pulling younger generations away from traditional practice; commercialisation distorting the forms that survive (Pattachitra made for tourist markets bears little resemblance to ritual Pattachitra); and the absence of sustained economic viability making it impossible for practitioners to earn a living from their art.

Part Two: What the Global Evidence Says

Intangible Cultural Heritage: UNESCO's Framework and Its Limits

UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage provides the most comprehensive international framework for thinking about living cultural traditions. It defines ICH across five domains: oral traditions and expressions; performing arts; social practices, rituals and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; and traditional craftsmanship.

The Convention's central insight — that heritage is not owned by the state but by communities, and that preservation must happen with communities rather than to them — has important implications for how NGOs engage with cultural work. Top-down

preservation that turns living traditions into museum exhibits does not preserve them; it kills them slowly. What sustains a living tradition is its practice by people who find meaning in practising it, in contexts that make practice possible.

India has 16 elements inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List, including Chhau dance from Odisha's Mayurbhanj district. UNESCO listing raises global awareness and often triggers government and philanthropic support. It does not automatically solve the livelihoods problem for practitioners. A Chhau performer who is internationally recognised but cannot earn a living wage from performing will eventually stop performing.

The global evidence on effective ICH safeguarding identifies several consistent findings. Documentation is necessary but not sufficient — recording a tradition does not preserve it; only continued practice by living communities does. Transmission to the next generation is the central challenge — the guru-shishya relationship, the apprenticeship model, the family-based transmission of craft knowledge are all under pressure from economic migration and educational systems that do not value or integrate traditional knowledge. Livelihood viability is foundational — practitioners who cannot earn from their tradition will eventually leave it. And authenticity and economic survival are in tension — the traditions that sell best to tourist and export markets are often simplified, standardised versions that lose the depth that makes the original form significant.

The Cultural Economy: What Research Shows

The economics of cultural industries in developing contexts — specifically, how traditional craftspersons and performers can earn sustainable incomes while maintaining the integrity of their practice — is an emerging but important research field.

Several findings are relevant to Odisha:

Premium markets consistently pay substantially more for cultural products with documented provenance — where the story of who made the product, in what tradition, using what techniques, is part of what is being purchased. A Pattachitra painting with a certificate of authenticity, documentation of the Chitrakara family's lineage, and a short video of the work in progress sells for five to ten times more than an identical painting without this provenance. The craft is the same; the market information architecture is different.

GI (Geographical Indication) tags protect the regional identity of products but do not automatically generate premium prices. The tag is a necessary tool; market development is the other half of the work. Sambalpuri sarees have a GI tag; most Sambalpuri weavers still earn poverty wages because the tag has not been accompanied by the market infrastructure needed to translate it into premium prices at the point of production.

Cultural tourism — when designed with genuine community involvement in planning, management, and benefit-sharing — can provide sustainable livelihoods for cultural practitioners while maintaining the authenticity of what is being shared. When designed as a spectacle for outsider consumption, it produces both cultural distortion and economic inequity. The evidence strongly distinguishes between these two outcomes.

Digital documentation and distribution — high-quality video of performances, digital archives of oral traditions, social media presence for artisans — has opened new market channels and preservation mechanisms. But digital access in remote tribal areas where many of Odisha's most distinctive traditions are held remains limited.

Tribal Cultural Systems: The Specific Challenge

For Odisha's tribal cultural traditions — which are in many ways the most distinctive and internationally unknown part of the state's heritage — the challenges are specific and severe.

The integration of tribal communities into market economies and formal educational systems has, in many cases, weakened the transmission of traditional cultural practices without providing alternative structures for maintaining cultural identity. Young Bonda or Juang people who attend government boarding schools return to their communities having missed the socialisation through which traditional knowledge is normally transmitted.

The oral nature of most tribal cultural heritage means that it is held exclusively in living memory. When elders die without being recorded, and when the younger generation has not been present to learn, that knowledge is simply gone. Unlike written traditions, there is no archive to consult. Ethnographic documentation — sustained, deep, relationship-based recording of oral traditions, ritual knowledge, ecological knowledge, and performance traditions — is urgent and irreversible in its absence.

Sacred groves — areas of forest protected by cultural and spiritual beliefs rather than formal conservation law — are among the most biodiverse patches in Odisha's landscape. They are also increasingly threatened as the belief systems that protect them weaken and formal legal protection does not replace them. The cultural and the environmental are inseparable here: losing the belief system loses the forest, and losing the forest loses the material basis for many cultural practices.

Part Three: Five Organisations Doing This Exceptionally Well

1. Sangeet Natak Akademi (National — New Delhi)

The Sangeet Natak Akademi is India's apex body for the performing arts, designated by the Ministry of Culture as the nodal agency for ICH matters including UNESCO nominations. They maintain the National Inventory of ICH, support traditional artists through grants and fellowships, and coordinate documentation efforts across India's living traditions.

For Odisha specifically, SNA's Akademi Awards have recognised masters of Odissi, Chhau, Gotipua, and Sambalpuri traditions. Their documentation work on endangered performance traditions provides the archive that transmission depends on.

The transferable lesson: Documentation is a precondition for transmission. NGOs working in cultural heritage must invest in high-quality audio-visual documentation of living traditions while the practitioners are still alive and active — not as a memorial record but as a pedagogical resource that future practitioners can learn from.

2. Crafts Council of India / Dastkar

The Crafts Council of India, alongside Dastkar (a non-profit craft promotion organisation), have worked for decades on both the preservation of traditional crafts and the market development needed to sustain practitioners economically. Their approach combines documentation and archiving with active market linkage, design facilitation (connecting contemporary designers with traditional craftspersons to develop products that sell in contemporary markets while maintaining the integrity of the traditional technique), and exhibition and retail development.

The key design principle: craftspersons should be partners in market development, not just producers for markets that others design. When Chitrakarars in Raghurajpur participate in deciding what contemporary formats their work will take — and retain the rights and identity associated with their production — they sustain both their art and their economic agency. When they are simply commissioned to produce for a design house's catalogue, the economic benefit is marginal and the cultural agency is absent.

The transferable lesson for Odisha: CSR programmes in culture and heritage should fund the full work — documentation, practitioner support, market development, and cultural agency — not just purchase products or fund events. A craft fair is not cultural preservation; it is an occasional market. Sustainable market relationships, practitioner branding, and quality certification are what produce durable income.

3. Odisha Crafts Museum / Shilpa Guru Programme

The Government of Odisha's Shilpa Guru programme (master craftsman recognition) and the Odisha Crafts Museum in Bhubaneswar represent important state-level infrastructure for craft preservation. The museum maintains collections and demonstration spaces; the Shilpa Guru recognition provides prestige and modest financial support to master practitioners.

The limitation of the government model — documented across similar programmes internationally — is that prestige and museum recognition, without livelihoods, does not keep traditions alive. A Shilpa Guru who is honoured but cannot earn a living from their art will not train apprentices, because they cannot tell apprentices that the art will support them.

The transferable lesson: Government recognition programmes need NGO and CSR partners who can provide the economic infrastructure — guaranteed markets, training stipends for apprentices, quality certification infrastructure — that converts prestige into sustainable practice.

4. UNESCO Collaborative Programs — Chhau Documentation and Safeguarding

The Chhau inscription on UNESCO's ICH list has generated international attention and some documentation resources for the three regional Chhau traditions. The safeguarding work linked to the inscription — training younger practitioners, documenting the full scope of the tradition, establishing intergenerational transmission programmes in Mayurbhanj, Seraikella, and Purulia — provides a model for how UNESCO inscription can be translated into active preservation.

The challenge: Mayurbhanj Chhau, which is performed without masks and considered the most martial and technically demanding of the three forms, is also the most difficult to sustain because it requires sustained physical training from childhood. Programmes that create performance opportunities — regular festivals, touring

opportunities, school-based training — produce more active practitioners than programmes that only document.

The transferable lesson: Performance is preservation. Traditions that are regularly performed in contexts that matter to communities — festivals, rituals, significant occasions — survive. Traditions that only survive in competition stages or tourist demonstrations gradually lose their cultural depth. Supporting the contexts in which traditions are naturally practised is more effective preservation than creating artificial performance occasions.

5. Digital Documentation Initiatives — INTACH and Local Partners

The Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) and various academic and civil society partners have undertaken digital documentation of Odisha's heritage traditions. High-quality video documentation of Pattachitra creation processes, Odissi guru-shishya sessions, tribal ritual performances, and oral tradition recitation is increasingly available.

The critical gap: this documentation is largely inaccessible to the communities it documents. An archive held in a Bhubaneswar institution does not help a Juang elder in Keonjhar transmit their oral knowledge to younger community members. Community-accessible documentation — on local servers, in local languages, through interfaces that communities can operate — is both technically achievable and almost entirely absent.

The transferable lesson: Documentation for preservation must be community-accessible, not just institutionally archived. The communities who hold these traditions must be the primary users of the documentation, not the secondary beneficiaries of scholarship that happens about them.

Part Four: The Odisha Adaptation

What Transfers Directly

Provenance documentation for artisan market access — the system of recording the practitioner's identity, lineage, technique, and production context as a market asset — transfers directly and immediately. It requires investment in photography, video, and written documentation for each registered artisan or artisan collective; a certification system (which can build on GI tags already existing for Pattachitra, Sambalpuri, and other traditions); and market relationships that value provenance.

Intergenerational transmission support — apprenticeship stipends, master-practitioner grants, school integration programmes — transfers directly from the global evidence on what keeps traditions alive. The guru-shishya relationship works when the shishya can afford to learn and the guru can afford to teach. Economic support for both sides of that relationship is what NGOs and CSR programmes can provide.

Performance as preservation — creating regular, meaningful performance contexts for performing arts traditions — transfers directly. This means festivals that are genuine community events, not only staged for tourists; ritual contexts maintained and supported; and school-based programme that treats traditional performance as a subject worth serious time and training.

What Requires Significant Adaptation

Market development for tribal cultural products and performances requires significantly more investment in community consultation and cultural safety than market development for more mainstream craft traditions. The question of what tribal communities are willing and appropriate to share with outsiders — and under what conditions, for what benefit — is not a question that can be answered by NGOs or CSR managers alone. It requires genuine, patient dialogue with communities over time.

Digital documentation in remote tribal areas requires connectivity and device infrastructure that does not yet exist in many of the places where the most distinctive traditions are held. Satellite connectivity, solar-powered devices, and offline-first documentation systems are technically available but require investment.

What Must Be Built

A livelihoods model for performing arts practitioners that does not depend on tourist consumption alone — because tourist consumption produces stylistic distortion — is essentially absent in Odisha. Odissi has a global market because of the quality of its training institutions and its international community of practitioners. Chhau, Gotipua, Pala, Daskathia do not. Building sustainable income for performers of these forms requires either public subsidy (government recognition programmes with real income, not token amounts), institutional markets (residency programmes, educational institution partnerships), or export/diaspora markets that require sustained market development investment.

Tribal oral tradition archives that are community-owned and community-accessible — not held in distant institutions but living in the communities they document — represent a genuinely new institutional model that requires both technical innovation and sustained NGO facilitation.

Part Five: Government Scheme Mapping

Scheme for Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage (Ministry of Culture): Funds documentation, preservation, training support, and UNESCO nomination preparation for ICH across India. NGO role: facilitation of applications for Odisha's practitioners and traditions; documentation support; training programme management.

Sangeet Natak Akademi Grants and Fellowships: Support for individual artists in classical and folk traditions. NGO role: connecting Odisha's practitioners with SNA processes; documentation support for applications.

Shilpa Guru Award (Odisha): State recognition for master craftspersons. NGO role: nomination support; connecting Shilpa Gurus with apprentice training programmes.

Zonal Cultural Centres (East Zone Cultural Centre, Kolkata): Regional bodies supporting folk and tribal arts. NGO role: performance facilitation; artist database maintenance; regional festival coordination.

GI Tags (Geographical Indication Registry): Pattachitra, Sambalpuri, Kotpad, Gopalpur, Dhokra, Bomkai, and other Odisha traditions have GI protection. NGO role: awareness among artisans of GI rights; enforcement support; new GI tag application support for unprotected traditions.

Tourism promotion (Odisha Tourism): Heritage tourism is a significant government priority. NGO role: advocacy for community benefit-sharing in cultural tourism; responsible tourism standard development; artisan village tourism programme design with genuine community partnership.

PM Vishwakarma (2023): Central scheme providing recognition, skill training, and credit support to traditional artisans and craftspersons. NGO role: enrolment facilitation; documentation support; training quality monitoring.

Part Six: Further Reading

Living Traditions and ICH:

- *Folk Culture and Tradition in Odisha* — JAAFR Research Journal (2025): The most current synthesis of research on Odisha's folk traditions, their contemporary challenges, and preservation approaches.
- *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* — UNESCO (2003): The foundational international framework. Understanding its definition of ICH — living, community-owned, transmitted across generations — shapes how any cultural programme should be designed.

- *Intangible Cultural Heritage of India* — Ministry of Culture / Sangeet Natak Akademi: India's national inventory and the most comprehensive single source on the country's ICH landscape.

Craft Economics:

- *Crafting a Future: Economic Viability for Traditional Craftspersons* — Crafts Council of India and Dastkar publications: Practical evidence on what market development approaches produce sustainable incomes for traditional craftspersons in India.

Tribal Cultures:

- *Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups of Odisha* — SCSTRTI, Bhubaneswar: The most authoritative ethnographic overview of Odisha's 13 PVTGs, including cultural practices, belief systems, and contemporary pressures.

A Final Note: Culture Is Not a Sector

The framing of "Culture & Heritage" as a sector in a development framework risks a category error: treating living traditions as resources to be managed rather than as the ways in which communities understand themselves.

Odisha's cultural traditions are not separate from its development. The Dongria Kondh's Dhemsa dance is not a tourist attraction available on the side of their agricultural livelihood — it is part of the same integrated world in which they understand their relationship to the Niyamgiri hills, manage their social relations, and transmit their ecological knowledge to the next generation. Pattachitra is not a craft product — it is a devotional practice with a 1,000-year continuous tradition, produced by families who understand their art as an act of service to Lord Jagannath.

Development programmes that treat culture as a sector to be preserved alongside other sectors — like health or agriculture — risk missing the point. Culture is the context in which all other development happens. Programmes that build on existing

cultural systems and identities, rather than treating them as obstacles or decorations, produce better development outcomes across every sector.

The NGO and CSR role in Odisha's cultural landscape is most powerful when it treats cultural practitioners as agents of their own traditions — people who understand those traditions far better than any external organisation ever will — and provides the economic, market, and institutional infrastructure that allows them to sustain those traditions on their own terms.

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Related Knowledge Commons:

- Practice Note: Artisan Market Development — Provenance, Certification, Premium Access
- Practice Note: Community Cultural Tourism — Design for Equity
- Practice Note: Oral Tradition Documentation — Community-Accessible Archives
- Org Spotlight: Dastkar — Craft Market Development Without Distortion
- Org Spotlight: Sangeet Natak Akademi — ICH Documentation and Safeguarding
- Sector Primer: Agriculture & Markets (Sector 09) — Artisan market linkage
- Sector Primer: Social Justice & Tribal Welfare (Sector 03) — Tribal rights and cultural systems

Schemes Referenced: ICH Safeguarding Scheme (MoC) · SNA Grants · Shilpa Guru Award · East Zone Cultural Centre · GI Tags · Odisha Tourism · PM Vishwakarma