

# Intergenerational Transmission — Keeping Performing Arts Traditions Alive

The research on traditional performing arts transmission in India and globally — drawing on UNESCO's ICH documentation literature, field evidence from Sangeet Natak Akademi studies, and evaluation of Chhau safeguarding programmes — consistently identifies three conditions that mu...

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**B** practice-note Culture & Heritage

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## Condition 1: A master who has time to teach

This sounds obvious. It is almost always the constraint. A Pala singer, a Chhau master, a Gotipua guru, a Daskathia performer who is spending 60–70% of their time on agricultural labour, construction work, or other subsistence activity because their art cannot sustain them financially does not have time to teach. They may perform occasionally. They will not transmit systematically.

The economic support required for a master to teach is not the cost of formal schooling or a training institution. It is the equivalent of a modest monthly income — ₹8,000–15,000 depending on the tradition and location — that frees enough of the master's time for systematic, daily or multi-day-per-week transmission sessions with students.

The Sangeet Natak Akademi's Akademi Awards and the Odisha Shilpa Guru Award provide recognition. Neither provides income at this level consistently. The gap between what these awards provide (prestige, one-time grants in some cases) and what systematic transmission requires (sustained monthly income equivalent) is the space that CSR and NGO funding can fill.

## Condition 2: A student who can afford to learn

Traditional transmission — the guru-shishya relationship — was sustained historically through a combination of residential learning (the student lived with the guru), in-kind support (the guru's household absorbed the student's labour in exchange for teaching), and social expectation (learning the tradition was what young people in guru-families did). In many cases, particularly for caste-hereditary traditions like Pattachitra and Gotipua, the student came from within the art-practising family and had no economic choice but to learn.

All of these historical structures have weakened significantly. Young people from traditional art

families now have alternatives — construction work, migration, educational credentials that lead to different employment. The student who would have defaulted into learning the tradition now makes an active choice. That choice is heavily influenced by economics: can learning this tradition lead to an income? If not, the rational choice for a young person facing food insecurity is to learn something that can.

**Apprenticeship stipend programmes** — modest monthly payments to young people who commit to systematic learning under a specific guru for a defined period — have demonstrated effectiveness in comparable contexts globally. The amount need not be large relative to opportunity cost: ₹3,000–5,000 per month for 18 months of structured learning, providing the student enough support to not need to prioritise other income-generating activity during the learning period.

### **Condition 3: A learning context that provides sufficient time**

Traditional guru-shishya transmission was full-time and long-term — often years of daily practice. Contemporary approximations of this — after-school sessions three times per week, holiday camps, occasional workshops — can build awareness and appreciation but cannot produce a performer capable of the next transmission. The embodied knowledge of Chhau's martial techniques, Odissi's tribhangi, or Pala's classical raga structure requires years of daily practice and direct physical correction that weekend programmes cannot substitute.

The structures that come closest to providing adequate transmission time in the contemporary context:

- **Residential learning institutions** — the few gurukul-style institutions where students live and learn full-time remain the most effective transmission environments. Supporting existing institutions of this kind (e.g., Odissi gurukuls, established Chhau training centres) is more efficient than creating new ones.
  - **School integration** where the art is taught as a subject for a meaningful portion of the school day — not one period per week but daily — and where trained practitioners, not enthusiastic amateurs, teach. This requires formal school curriculum inclusion (which Odisha has done for some classical arts but not for folk and PVTG traditions) and payment of practitioner-teachers at rates that attract the genuinely skilled.
  - **Intensive block programmes** — extended periods (one to three months) of full-time learning, scheduled around agricultural calendars in rural contexts, that compress sufficient practice time into structured blocks. Less effective than continuous learning but more realistic in communities where students have other economic demands.
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# The Traditions at Greatest Risk in Odisha

Not all of Odisha's performing arts traditions face the same transmission risk. The risk landscape is worth understanding before designing support.

## Lowest risk (established transmission systems):

- **Odissi dance and music** — institutional infrastructure, global community of practitioners, training institutions in Bhubaneswar and beyond. The guru-shishya tradition is alive through multiple institutional channels. The risk is westernisation and commodification of the form, not extinction.

## Medium risk (transmission happening but fragile):

- **Chhau** (all three forms — Mayurbhanj, Seraikella, Purulia) — UNESCO inscription has brought resources and attention. Transmission is active but economically precarious. Mayurbhanj Chhau in particular requires training from childhood given its physical demands; the number of young people entering training has declined.
- **Gotipua** — the tradition of training young boys in the acrobatic dance that predated and shaped Odissi. A few centres in Puri and Raghurajpur maintain transmission. Economic pressure on families is the primary constraint.

## Highest risk (transmission near critical minimum):

- **Pala and Daskathia** — oral performance traditions combining classical music, epic narrative, and theatrical elements. The performance occasions that create both income for practitioners and socialisation of audiences are declining. Young people in the tradition's home regions are not learning it, because they see no economic future in it.
- **PVTG performing traditions** — the ritual music, dance, and oral performance of Odisha's 13 PVTG communities. These exist nowhere else in the same form. The specific cultural context that gives them meaning — seasonal agricultural rituals, community conflict resolution ceremonies, healing practices — is disrupted by migration, market integration, and the weakening of traditional governance structures. Transmission within these communities is neither systematic nor economically supported in any institutional sense.

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## The School Integration Question

School integration — teaching a performing arts tradition as part of the school curriculum — is the intervention that offers the greatest scale but requires the most careful design to work.

### What works in school integration:

- Teaching by genuine practitioners, not enthusiastic generalists. A school that teaches Chhau through a trained Chhau practitioner will produce students who can dance. One that teaches through a physical education teacher who has attended a workshop will produce students who have had a cultural experience.
- Curriculum depth sufficient for skill development. Daily practice, or at minimum three sessions per week, is required to build the physical memory that performing arts require. One period per week is insufficient and should not be framed as transmission — it is cultural exposure.
- Performance as a graduation milestone. Students who perform publicly — in school contexts, in community occasions, in district events — have social reinforcement for their skill development that students who practise only in class do not.
- Teacher payment that attracts skill. A Chhau master paid ₹12,000 per month as a school teaching resource is making a livelihood choice that is better than sporadic performance income. The rate needs to be competitive with what the practitioner could earn through other means.

#### **What doesn't work:**

- Annual cultural day performances where children perform simplified versions of traditions they have been learning for one term
- Integration that treats performing arts as extracurricular rather than curricular — subject to cancellation when examination preparation intensifies

**The Odisha government's current position:** Odisha includes classical arts in secondary school curricula in a limited way. The folk traditions — Pala, Daskathia, Chhau, Gotipua — are not systematically integrated at the school level beyond cultural event programming. Advocacy for curriculum integration of at-risk traditions, with genuine practitioner teaching and adequate curriculum time, is legitimate NGO policy advocacy work.

## **Performance as Preservation: Creating Occasions That Matter**

The UNESCO ICH framework is explicit: traditions that are only performed on festival stages or for tourist audiences gradually lose the cultural depth that makes them meaningful. Traditions that are performed in the contexts that originally gave them meaning — seasonal festivals, life-cycle ceremonies, community gatherings — remain alive at a deeper level.

For NGOs and CSR programmes, this means that the most effective performance support is not funding stage performances or competitions — it is supporting the community occasions in which traditions are naturally practised.

## Practical approaches:

- Support the restoration and annual celebration of community festivals where specific performing traditions have historically been performed — not as tourist events but as community events for the community itself. The Dongria Kondh's forest festival, the Juang's Magh Puja, the Santal's Baha and Sohrae — these are the living contexts of tribal performance traditions.
  - Support practitioner income during the traditional performance seasons — the agricultural transition periods when Pala and Daskathia have historically been performed — so that practitioners can perform without the economic pressure that forces them to other work.
  - Create touring circuits between communities where traditions are practised and urban diaspora communities from those traditions. A Pala performance for an Odisha-origin diaspora audience in Bhubaneswar provides both income for practitioners and cultural connection for community members separated from their home traditions.
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## The CSR Role: What Funding Produces Transmission

The most common CSR support for performing arts in India is event funding — supporting festivals, competitions, cultural programmes. This produces visibility and occasional income for a small number of practitioners. It does not produce transmission.

The CSR investments that produce transmission:

**Master practitioners' stipends:** ₹10,000–15,000 per month to a documented master practitioner of an at-risk tradition, conditional on conducting at minimum eight transmission sessions per month with identified students. This is a low cost per beneficiary compared to most CSR interventions; it is high impact because it directly addresses the economic constraint on the master's teaching time.

**Student apprenticeship support:** ₹3,000–5,000 per month per student in structured apprenticeship learning with a documented master. A cohort of eight students per master, over 18 months, represents the minimum unit of transmission that produces a next generation of competent practitioners.

**Residential institution support:** The handful of residential gurukul-style institutions where full-time transmission happens are chronically underfunded. Infrastructure maintenance, teacher salaries, and student stipends in these institutions are the most cost-effective use of CSR funds for transmission at scale.

**Documentation of specific masters:** High-quality video documentation of masters

demonstrating and teaching their full repertoire, while they are still able, is an urgent investment particularly for PVTG traditions and for Pala and Daskathia. This is not the same as transmission, but it is the preservation of the teaching material that future transmission might draw on. Cost: ₹1,00,000–2,00,000 for comprehensive documentation of one master's repertoire.

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## Measuring What Transmission Produces

At five years, a well-supported transmission programme should demonstrate:

- A documented cohort of 10–20 trained students per supported master, at minimum competency level (assessed by the master, not by outside evaluators who lack the expertise)
- At least two of those students conducting their own transmission — teaching juniors
- Active performance occasions — not less frequently than they were happening before the programme began
- The master practitioner still actively teaching, not having left the tradition for other income

These are slow metrics. They require five-year programme cycles to measure meaningfully. Most CSR programmes are structured in one-to-three-year cycles. The mismatch between the programme cycle and the transmission timeline is one of the most fundamental obstacles to effective performing arts support — and advocating for multi-year funding commitments is itself a significant NGO contribution.

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Related Knowledge Commons content: Culture & Heritage Sector Primer (*Sector 05*) · Practice Note: Oral Tradition Documentation — community-accessible archives · Practice Note: Community Cultural Tourism — Design for Equity · Practice Note: Artisan Market Development — economic viability for craft practitioners

Evidence Grade: B — Practice-based and multi-study. This Practice Note draws on UNESCO ICH safeguarding documentation, Sangeet Natak Akademi practitioner support programme evaluations, the Chhau UNESCO inscription safeguarding plan, field documentation from Odisha's Gotipua and Pala traditions, and global literature on intergenerational transmission of performing arts. Last reviewed: April 2026.

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