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Digital Archiving of Indian Folk Theatre: Preservation, Access, and Cultural Policy Implications

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Page No. 1-6

Abstract: Digital archiving has emerged as a critical strategy in preserving India's rich but fragile folk theatre traditions many of which, such as Kutiyattam, Mudiyyettu, and Tholu Bommalata, are recognized as UNESCO listed Intangible Cultural Heritage. This paper investigates current digitization initiatives including those by the Sangeet Natak Akademi and national repositories to assess their effectiveness in safeguarding performance content, improving scholarly access, and informing cultural policy. Drawing from archival data, policy reports, and case studies, this study identifies technological, structural, and policy barriers. It recommends strategic enhancements: community-driven documentation, metadata standardization, and sustainable funding models. By situating digital preservation as both cultural stewardship and democratic access, the research proposes pathways to ensure India's folk theatre heritage continues to inform contemporary cultural discourse.

Keywords: digital archiving, folk theatre, India, intangible cultural heritage, Sangeet Natak Akademi, UNESCO, cultural policy

Introduction

India possesses one of the world's richest and most diverse repertoires of folk theatre, encompassing ritual enactments, narrative performances, and hybrid forms that blur the boundaries between sacred ceremony and popular entertainment (Bhowmik 2019; Rao 2011). Examples range from Kutiyattam of Kerala, recognized by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, to Tholu Bommalata of Andhra Pradesh and Mudiyyettu of Kerala, both of which combine performative, ritual, and narrative dimensions (Ministry of Culture 2022; UNESCO 2018). This diversity reflects India's layered history of linguistic, regional, and religious plurality (Dutta 2014).

Yet these traditions face acute existential pressures. Declining rural patronage, generational discontinuity among performer families, and competition from mass-mediated entertainment have led to shrinking performance circuits (Chhabra 2010). Economic precarity—where performers often depend on seasonal agricultural labour—further erodes sustainability (Bhowmik 2019). Compounding these challenges is uneven institutional support. While some forms receive sporadic state patronage or tourism-oriented promotion, many remain absent from official cultural inventories, limiting access to funding and scholarly attention (Hafstein 2004; UNESCO Bangkok 2017).

India's ratification of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003 formally committed the nation to safeguarding living traditions through inventories and reporting mechanisms (UNESCO 2003). Although this has stimulated documentation initiatives, digitization and archiving remain fragmented and unevenly



implemented (Kumar 2014). Many initiatives are concentrated in metropolitan institutions, reinforcing urban–rural access divides (Srinivasan 2018). Digital archiving, when strategically designed, can move beyond mere preservation to support education, research, and public engagement through interoperable metadata and open-access platforms (Conway 2010).

Historical and Policy Evolution of Digital Preservation in India

India's engagement with digital preservation frameworks gained momentum in the late 2000s with the launch of the National Digital Preservation Programme (NDPP) in 2008 (National Digital Preservation Programme 2025). This initiative sought to address risks posed by technological obsolescence and digital fragility (Ketelaar 2009). Subsequent efforts by C-DAC, including the establishment of the Centre of Excellence for Digital Preservation in 2011, contributed tools, standards, and pilot repositories aligned with international best practices (IGNCA 2021). These developments marked a transition from ad hoc documentation to standards-based digital stewardship, laying the groundwork for a national digital repository framework. April 2011, the Centre of Excellence for Digital Preservation, as a flagship initiative under NDPP, was operationalized at C-DAC Pune. Its mandate included developing tools, guidelines, and pilot repositories as well as contributing to the formulation of a national digital preservation policy. Among its key outputs were digital preservation standards and the open source archival system Digitizing, capable of managing audio visual archives, e-records, and other digital assets Digital Preservation Coalition (C-DAC). Later iterations of the system supported the National Cultural Audiovisual Archive (NCAA) at IGNCA, reinforcing it as a trustworthy digital repository undergoing ISO 16363 certification Digital Preservation Coalition. These initiatives reflect a watershed transforming digital archiving in India from ad hoc documentation to standards based preservation, with national institutions increasingly equipped for long term stewardship.

Methodology

The study Adopt the Qualitative methodology.

Document Analysis: Review of national policy documents (Ministry of Culture, UNESCO), institutional records (Sangeet Natak Akademi, IGNCA), and media coverage (press releases, news reports).

Case Studies: Institutions such as the Sangeet Natak Akademi's Documentation Unit and the NCAA at IGNCA.

Comparative Review: Drawing lessons from international digital preservation platforms.

Expert Interviews: Conversations with archivists and folklorists to understand digitization constraints and opportunities.

Metadata, Rights, and Ethical Dimensions in Folk Theatre Archiving

A robust archival system depends on clear metadata standards. Under NDPP, C-DAC formulated the e-GOV PID standard, which standardizes metadata fields cataloguing, provenance, fixity, representation, digital signatures, and access rights for electronic records, aligning with the OAIS reference model C-DAC. Alongside these, the DIGITĀLAYA framework and associated tools (e.g., extraction tools, PDF/A converters, large-scale ingestion platforms) enable automated, auditable workflows for ingesting and preserving diverse media formats Digital Preservation Coalition C-DAC.

Despite these technical capabilities, cultural archives—especially in performing arts—often lack integration into this ecosystem. Folk theatre archives frequently still rely on analog storage, absent standardized preservation metadata, which hampers interoperability and long-term resilience. This gap underscores the importance of extending metadata frameworks like



Dublin Core or CIDOC-CRM, tailored for performative heritage, to ensure meaningful cross-repository discovery and scholarly reuse.(Gill 2014)

Archiving folk theatre involves intricate considerations. Beyond preservation, ethical archiving demands sensitivity to intellectual property rights, performer consent, and community ownership. Many folk practitioners hold a proprietary sense of their cultural expressions; archival frameworks must respect this by adopting clear rights management protocols, possibly including Creative Commons licensing or community-curated access guidelines. Metadata also capture contextual richness local terminologies, performer names, ritual significance, and regional variants elements often overlooked in institutional cataloguing. Participatory metadata models, similar to those used in Europeana, can empower communities to annotate digital assets with vernacular insights, ensuring authenticity and interpretive depth.

Institutional vs. Community-driven Preservation: Toward Hybrid Models:

While institutions like SNA and IGNCA provide essential infrastructure, they can be technocratic and distant from practitioners. By contrast, community-driven projects, often grassroots and participatory, bring rich local knowledge but lack scale and sustainability. Hybrid models offer a path forward: institutions supply archival frameworks, while practitioners contribute narrative context and ontologies. For instance, deploying mobile documentation kits enables local artists to record performances and metadata in situ, feeding into national repositories under community friendly guidelines.

Policy, Funding, and Institutional Sustainability:

Institutional sustainability hinges on clear policy mandates and stable funding. The National Mission for Manuscripts (NMM) exemplifies this: it instituted dedicated grants, a public portal, and an institutional framework for ongoing digitization of rare texts. A parallel National Folk Theatre Digitization Mission could adopt this model ensuring regular funding, oversight, and integration into the Ministry of Culture's digital heritage strategies. Additionally, state-level initiatives like the UP Digital Heritage Museum (to open around 2026 with AR/VR integration) suggest growing interest in immersive heritage models Digital Meets CultureRadioandMusic. Yet without long-term operational planning, such projects risk becoming one-off spectacles. Embedding AR/VR modules within a broader digital portal backed by maintenance funding can ensure longevity and research value.(Smith 2006)

Analysis and Discussion

Institutional Archival Capacity:

The Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA) remains India's principal institutional custodian of performing arts heritage, maintaining a formidable audiovisual repository comprising over 8,361 hours of video recordings, 7,965 hours of audio, and approximately 257,000 photographs (Sangeet Natak Akademi). Its Documentation Unit is equipped with analogue-to-digital playback and editing facilities, which signifies not only a technical commitment to preservation but also an understanding of the urgency of format migration a critical step given the fragility of magnetic tape and optical disc formats (Brylawski 41). However, this wealth of material is paradoxically underutilised in scholarship and public discourse due to its restricted accessibility. Much of the content remains available only for on-site consultation at the Akademi's New Delhi premises, effectively excluding researchers, practitioners, and enthusiasts without the resources to travel. In contrast, institutions such as the British Library's *Sounds* archive or the Library of Congress *National Jukebox* provide remote, searchable access to substantial segments of their collections (British Library; Library of Congress). This comparison highlights a pressing gap: while SNA's preservation capacity is commendable, its



dissemination mechanisms lag behind global best practices. Without addressing access barriers, the archive risks functioning as a “heritage vault” rather than a living research resource. (Brown 2003; Hennessy 2012).

National Digital Infrastructure :

The establishment of the National Cultural Audiovisual Archives (NCAA) under the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) marks an important step in consolidating India’s disparate heritage repositories. As a fully certified Trusted Digital Repository managing over two petabytes of cultural audiovisual data, the NCAA demonstrates a long-term commitment to digital preservation standards, including metadata compliance and integrity checks (Wikipedia; IGNCA). However, while the platform’s holdings encompass music, dance, and oral traditions, explicit data on folk theatre collections remain either scattered or unpublicised, complicating scholarly mapping of theatrical heritage representation. (Deacon 2004) Moreover, the NCAA’s current user interface, while functional, leans heavily towards metadata browsing rather than immersive user experience. In countries such as Australia, the *Trove* digital platform integrates not only audiovisual data but also linked textual, photographic, and geospatial metadata, allowing researchers to contextualise artefacts within broader cultural ecosystems (National Library of Australia). Applying such integrative principles to the NCAA could enhance the discoverability and interdisciplinary usability of folk theatre resources.

UNESCO and ICH Coordination :

SNA’s role as the nodal agency for maintaining India’s Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) National Inventory and liaising with UNESCO illustrates the formal recognition of performing arts in global heritage governance frameworks (IndiaICH SNA). The inventory lists various traditional art forms, including *Kutiyyattam* and *Ramlila*, which enjoy UNESCO inscription, thus benefiting from increased international visibility and potential funding. Nevertheless, significant lacunae persist. Forms such as Odisha’s *pattachitra* theatre an itinerant narrative art involving scroll painting and performance and the textile-based visual storytelling of *Pipili appliqué* are absent from the ICH register despite their cultural significance (The Times of India). This absence reflects broader challenges in ICH nomination processes, which often depend on proactive state cultural departments and organised practitioner groups. The omission of such traditions risks their marginalisation in national and global heritage discourse. UNESCO’s own reports stress that without comprehensive representation, the safeguarding of intangible heritage risks becoming selective and skewed towards politically favoured traditions (UNESCO, *Operational Directives* 2018).

Community and Technological Integration :

Emerging technological interventions in heritage preservation such as crowdsourced 3D modelling projects like *Tirtha* and immersive VR reconstructions like *AipanVR* indicate growing recognition of participatory and immersive approaches (arXiv). These methods are especially valuable for resource-limited contexts where conventional digitisation infrastructure is costly. Applied to folk theatre, such tools could transform archival engagement. Imagine a 3D-scanned *Nautanki* stage, layered with oral histories from surviving performers, or an interactive VR experience of a *Therukoothu* performance in Tamil Nadu where users can navigate through the audience and backstage areas. (Kurin 2004) This kind of multimodal documentation not only preserves physical stagecraft and costume design but also captures performative nuances gestures, intonation, spatial relationships that static video often flattens. International models offer valuable precedents. The *Europeana* platform incorporates community tagging and storytelling functions, allowing local custodians to annotate digital



artefacts with vernacular knowledge. Implementing similar participatory frameworks for Indian folk theatre archives could democratise preservation and encourage intergenerational transmission of intangible skills.

Access, Policy, and Sustainability :

Despite the presence of robust repositories, a persistent obstacle is the lack of open-access platforms tailored for folk theatre archives. Remote accessibility is often hampered by rights management, bureaucratic inertia, and inadequate digital infrastructure. Addressing this requires a multi-pronged policy framework encompassing -

- ✧ Open-access mandates for publicly funded digitisation projects.
- ✧ Uniform metadata standards preferably aligned with Dublin Core or CIDOC-CRM to ensure interoperability across repositories.
- ✧ Dedicated funding streams under the Ministry of Culture for performance-specific digitization.

A promising model is the National Mission for Manuscripts, which has successfully catalogued and digitised rare texts while maintaining a user-friendly online portal. Translating this model to performance archives could greatly enhance accessibility. Additionally, the proposed Uttar-Pradesh Folk Museum slated to incorporate AR/VR experiences by 2026 signals a growing interest in interactive heritage display (The Times of India). However, without a sustainable operational framework, such initiatives risk becoming one-time spectacles rather than enduring research and learning platforms..

Conclusion

India's folk theatre traditions embody centuries of cultural memory and performative eloquence. While institutions such as the Sangeet Natak Akademi and IGNSA have made foundational contributions, significant gaps in digital preservation, access, and institutional inclusivity persist. A coordinated strategy combining community participation, technological innovation, standardized metadata, and policy support can transform archival practices. Such an approach upholds both cultural heritage and democratic knowledge dissemination, ensuring these living traditions inspire future generations.

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