

EXPLORING THE FASCINATING WORLD OF INDIAN FOLKLORE: GENRES, LINGUISTIC FOUNDATIONS, CLASSICAL STORY TRADITIONS AND THE POLITICS OF SAFEGUARDING

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ABSTRACT

India's folklore is among the world's richest and most varied, yet it is rarely examined in a single analytical frame that links its linguistic base, its genres, its classical literary afterlives and its present-day recognition and vulnerability. This paper offers such a synthesis through documentary analysis of secondary sources. It (i) outlines a typology of Indian folklore into six broad genres, (ii) situates folklore within the country's linguistic diversity using Census of India 2011 data, (iii) compares seven classical story collections that carried folk narrative into Sanskrit, Pali and world literature, and (iv) analyses the sixteen Indian elements inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity up to December 2025. The Census recorded 19,569 raw mother-tongue returns, grouped into 121 languages with 10,000 or more speakers, of which 22 are scheduled; the eleven largest languages account for 92 per cent of the population by first language, so the folklore of smaller languages is statistically almost invisible. Of the sixteen UNESCO-inscribed Indian elements, seven (44%) are performing arts and five (31%) are festivals or social practices, while none is, by title, a prose-tale or oral-epic tradition. The paper argues that Indian folklore is best understood as a living, performed and unequally recognised cultural resource, and it proposes safeguarding priorities in documentation, language, livelihoods and community consent.

Keywords: Indian folklore; oral tradition; folk performance; intangible cultural heritage; Panchatantra; linguistic diversity; safeguarding.

INTRODUCTION

The English word 'folk-lore' was proposed in 1846 by the antiquarian William Thoms as a dignified substitute for 'popular antiquities', but the practices it names are far older than the term. In India, tales, songs, epics, rituals and crafts have been transmitted for centuries across thousands of communities, and some of the world's earliest story collections were composed in Indian languages. Folklore here is not an antiquarian remnant. Epics are sung through the night in villages, spirit deities possess their performers at annual festivals, and women's songs accompany sowing, marriage and mourning.

The subject is large and the scholarship is scattered across folklore, literature, anthropology, performance studies and linguistics. A researcher approaching Indian folklore therefore meets three difficulties: the sheer variety of forms, the lack of a shared classificatory vocabulary, and the uneven way in which different forms are documented, recognised and funded. This paper addresses these difficulties through four questions:

- **RQ1.** What are the principal genres of Indian folklore, and how may they be organised?
- **RQ2.** What linguistic landscape do these genres inhabit?

- **RQ3.** How did classical story collections transform folk narrative into written literature?
- **RQ4.** Which forms of Indian folklore are formally recognised today, and which are left out?

The paper's contribution is integrative. It does not present new fieldwork; it assembles verifiable data from the Census of India, the UNESCO list and the published scholarship, and uses simple classification and descriptive statistics to bring out patterns that are otherwise hidden in the volume of descriptive literature.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Defining folklore

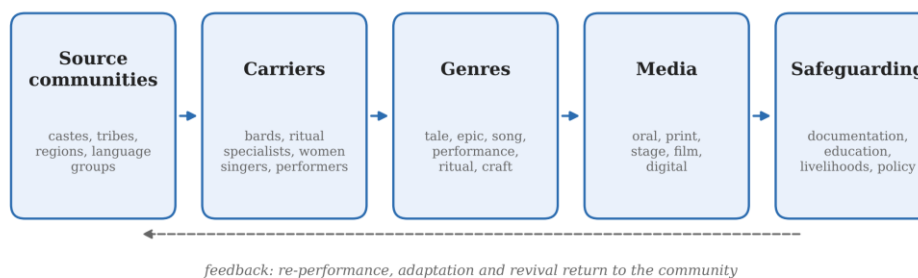
Dundes (1980) defined the 'folk' as any group of people who share at least one common linking factor, whether religion, occupation, language or region; folklore is then the traditional expressive culture of such groups. Bascom (1954) identified four functions of folklore: amusement, validation of culture, education, and the maintenance of social

conformity. Bauman (1977) shifted the emphasis from texts to performance, insisting that verbal art lives in the act of telling, with an audience and a context. For India this performative turn is essential, because many genres exist only when performed: a Bhoota Kola does not exist on a page, and an epic such as Pabuji is inseparable from the painted cloth, the singer and the night of its performance (Smith, 1991).

A working model

Figure 1 summarises the model adopted in this paper. Folklore arises within source communities, is carried by specialised and non-specialised carriers (bards, ritual specialists, women singers, itinerant performers), takes the form of recognisable genres, circulates through a succession of media from oral performance to print, stage, film and digital platforms, and is, in the contemporary period, the object of safeguarding efforts. The arrow of feedback matters: adaptation and revival re-enter the community and alter the tradition, so the relationship between folklore and its media is circular rather than linear (cf. Bendix, 1997; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983).

Figure 1. Conceptual model of the life of Indian folklore



Source: author's synthesis.

Scholarship on Indian folklore

The modern scholarship has three broad strands. Colonial-era collectors such as Frere (1868) and Temple (1884–1900) published tales gathered from

informants, often with limited attention to performance context. In the twentieth century, Elwin's (1944, 1949) collections from central India extended the record to tribal communities, and

Thompson and Balys (1958) catalogued Indian oral tales by motif. A third, more recent strand attends to performance, gender and ideology: the studies of oral epics collected by Blackburn and colleagues (1989), Beck's (1982) study of a South Indian folk epic, Smith's (1991) study of the Pabuji epic, Narayan's (1989) work on folk narrative in religious teaching, and Flueckiger's (1996) study of gender and genre in the folklore of central India. Ramanujan's (1991) anthology of tales from twenty-two languages remains the most widely used introduction. Institutionally, national academies for literature and for performing arts, and specialised bodies such as the National Folklore Support Centre in Chennai, have supported collection and publication.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs documentary analysis of secondary sources. Four datasets or corpora were used: (a) the Census of India 2011 language data, as reported in published tabulations, for the linguistic setting; (b) a set of seven classical Indian story collections, described from standard editions and reference works; (c) the list of Indian elements on

UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, as compiled in educational and press summaries current to December 2025 (sixteen elements); and (d) the scholarly literature on genres and performance. Classification of genres (Table 1) and of the primary domain of each UNESCO element (Table 3, Figure 4) is the author's own and is interpretive. The five UNESCO domains (oral traditions and expressions; performing arts; social practices, rituals and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; and traditional craftsmanship) were used as the coding frame, with each element assigned a single primary domain. Because UNESCO itself may assign several domains to one element, the percentages reported should be read as indicative.

FINDINGS

A typology of Indian folklore (RQ1)

Table 1 organises Indian folklore into six broad genres, each with typical forms and regional examples. The categories overlap in practice: a ritual may contain an epic, and a folk painting may be the visual accompaniment of a sung narrative.

Table 1. A working typology of Indian folklore genres

Genre	Characteristics	Illustrative forms and regions	Key literature
Folktales, fables and legends	Prose narratives told in households and communities; animal tales, wonder tales, trickster tales, local legends	Pan-Indian tale types; regional collections from Rajasthan, Bengal, Punjab, central India	Ramanujan (1991); Thompson & Balys (1958); Elwin (1944)
Oral epics	Long narratives sung or recited, often over several nights, with music and sometimes a painted scroll	Pabuji (Rajasthan); Annanmar Katai (Tamil Nadu); Siri (Tulu Nadu); Alha (Bundelkhand); Pandavani (Chhattisgarh)	Smith (1991); Beck (1982); Blackburn et al. (1989)
Ritual and spirit-possession performance	Embodied performance in which a human performer becomes the vessel of a deity or spirit; tied to land and lineage	Bhoota Kola (Tulu Nadu); Theyyam (northern Kerala); Mudi yettu (Kerala)	Claus (1975)

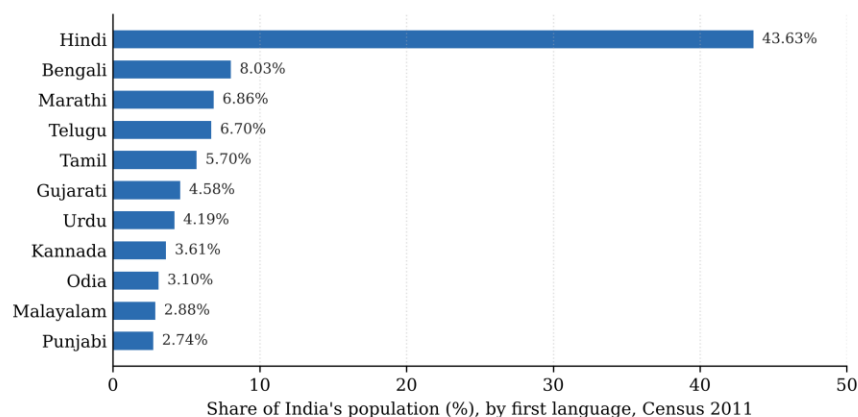
Genre	Characteristics	Illustrative forms and regions	Key literature
Folk theatre and dance-drama	Musical theatre and dance combining narrative, mask or costume and community participation	Yakshagana (coastal Karnataka); Therukoothu (Tamil Nadu); Nautanki (Uttar Pradesh); Jatra (Bengal); Chhau (eastern India); Ramlila (north India)	UNESCO (2003) inventories; Lutgendorf (1991)
Songs and women's genres	Work songs, life-cycle songs, devotional and mystic poetry transmitted orally, with a strong female and non-elite authorship	Women's songs of Chhattisgarh; Kabir traditions; Baul songs (Bengal); Kalbelia songs (Rajasthan)	Flueckiger (1996); Hess (2015)
Material and visual folk culture	Painted, woven and crafted objects that carry narrative and ritual meaning	Phad painting (Rajasthan); Warli (Maharashtra); Madhubani (Bihar); Pattachitra (Odisha and Bengal); Thathera metalwork (Punjab)	Smith (1991)

Source: author's classification, based on the cited literature. Examples are illustrative, not exhaustive.

The linguistic landscape (RQ2)

Folklore is inseparable from language. According to the Census of India 2011, the 19,569 raw mother-tongue returns were, after linguistic rationalisation, grouped into 121 languages with 10,000 or more speakers, of which 22 are included in the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution (Gulf News, 2018). Figure 2 shows the share of the population by first language for the eleven largest languages, based on the published Census tabulation (Wikipedia, 'List of

languages by number of native speakers in India'). Hindi is the first language of 43.63% of the population, followed by Bengali (8.03%), Marathi (6.86%), Telugu (6.70%) and Tamil (5.70%). Taken together, the eleven languages shown account for 92.02% of the population, so that every other language, scheduled or not, shares the remaining 7.98%. It should be noted that, in the Census classification, many mother tongues are grouped under Hindi, so the Hindi share is partly a product of classification.



Source: Census of India 2011, as reported in published tabulations (see references). The total of the eleven languages is 92.02%.

This skewed distribution has a direct bearing on folklore. The largest languages have literary traditions, publishing industries and academic departments that collect and study their folklore, while the traditions of languages with small numbers of speakers, including many tribal languages in central and north-eastern India, may be known only to their communities. The statistic does not by itself measure folklore, but it indicates where documentation effort is likely to concentrate and where gaps are likely to lie. Smaller tongues also fall under the 10,000-speaker threshold used for the 121-language count, and are thus absent from the standard national tabulation.

Classical story collections (RQ3)

Table 2 compares seven collections. They show how folk narrative was shaped into frame-story literature, which in turn spread across languages and borders. The Panchatantra, traditionally credited to Vishnu Sharma and probably first composed around 300 CE, give or take a century or two, survives in over 200 versions in more than 50 languages (Wikipedia, 'List of Panchatantra stories'; see also Olivelle, 1997). The Vetala tales, a cycle of 25 stories in which a king must carry a corpse-possessing spirit and answer its riddles, appear in Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagara* (c. 1070) and in Kshemendra's *Brihatkathamajari* (c. 1037), both Sanskrit verse versions of the lost Brihatkatha tradition (Wikipedia, 'List of Vetala Tales').

Table 2. Selected classical Indian story collections

Collection	Approx. period / language	Structure	Notes
<i>Jataka</i> tales	First-millennium compilation; Pali	547 stories of the previous births of the Buddha	Animal and human tales recast as Buddhist moral teaching (Cowell, 1895–1907)
<i>Panchatantra</i>	c. 300 CE ($\pm$ 1–2 centuries); Sanskrit	Five books, each with a frame story (e.g. the wily jackals; the four friends and the hunter)	Traditionally attributed to Vishnu Sharma; over 200 versions in more than 50 languages
<i>Hitopadesha</i>	Medieval; Sanskrit	Four books drawing largely on Panchatantra material	A later Sanskrit reworking for instruction in conduct and statecraft
<i>Brihatkatha</i> tradition	Early; traditionally attributed to Gunadhya; original lost	A great cycle of tales known through later Sanskrit versions	Survives in Kshemendra's <i>Brihatkathamajari</i> (c. 1037) and Somadeva's <i>Kathasaritsagara</i> (c. 1070)
<i>Kathasaritsagara</i>	c. 1070; Sanskrit verse	Eighteen books of tales within tales	Contains the Vetala cycle in Book 12; translated as <i>The Ocean of Story</i>
<i>Vetala Panchavimshati</i>	Medieval; Sanskrit	25 tales told by a spirit to a king	Circulates as <i>Baital Pachisi</i> in Hindi and other languages
<i>Simhasana Dvatrimsika</i> and <i>Shukasaptati</i>	Medieval; Sanskrit	32 tales of a magical throne; 70 tales told by a parrot	Popular frame-story cycles; the former is linked to the Vikramaditya tradition

Sources: Wikipedia ('List of Panchatantra stories'; 'List of Vetala Tales'); Cowell (1895–1907); Olivelle (1997); author's synthesis. Dates are approximate and disputed in the scholarship.

Two analytical points follow. First, the frame-story device (a narrator who tells stories to achieve an end) is a structural bridge between oral and written narrative: it preserves the situation of performance within the text. Second, the same tales travelled and were rewritten, so that 'origin' and 'ownership' are always layered, a point of continuing importance in discussions of modern adaptation.

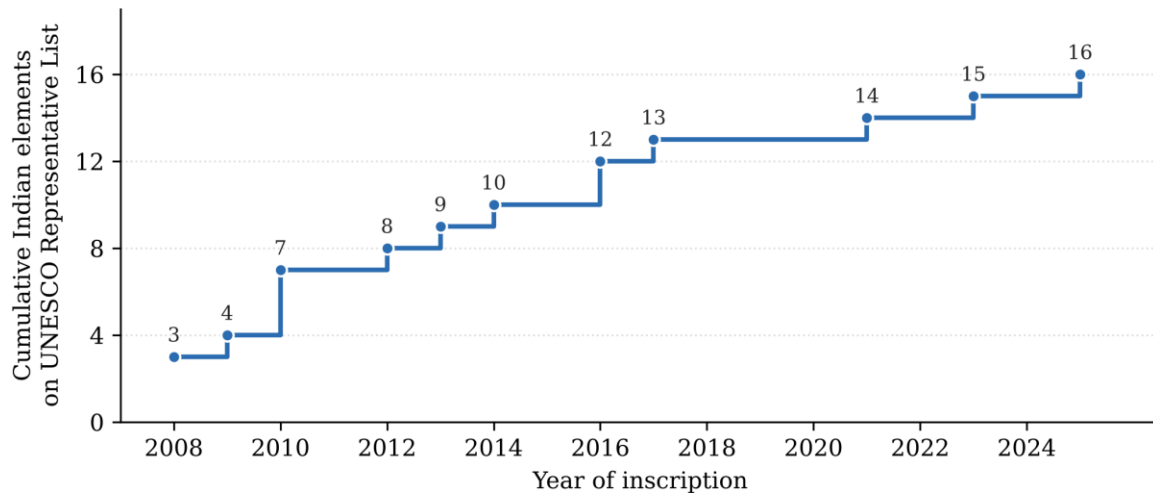
Recognition: Indian folklore on the UNESCO list (RQ4)

India has sixteen elements on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, the latest being Deepavali, added at the twentieth session of the Intergovernmental Committee in December 2025 (Drishti IAS, 2025; PMF IAS, n.d.). Table 3 lists them with their year, region and the author's primary domain code.

Table 3. Indian elements on UNESCO's Representative List (to December 2025)

#	Element	Year	Region	Primary domain (author's coding)
1	Kutiyattam, Sanskrit theatre	2008	Kerala	Performing arts
2	Ramlila, traditional performance of the Ramayana	2008	North India	Performing arts
3	Tradition of Vedic chanting	2008	Pan-Indian	Oral / chanting tradition
4	Ramman, religious festival and ritual theatre of Garhwal	2009	Uttarakhand	Performing arts
5	Chhau dance	2010	Eastern India	Performing arts
6	Kalbelia folk songs and dances	2010	Rajasthan	Performing arts
7	Mudiyettu, ritual theatre and dance drama	2010	Kerala	Performing arts
8	Buddhist chanting of Ladakh	2012	Ladakh	Oral / chanting tradition
9	Sankirtana, ritual singing, drumming and dancing	2013	Manipur	Performing arts
10	Brass and copper utensil-making of the Thatheras of Jandiala Guru	2014	Punjab	Traditional craft
11	Nowruz	2016	Multinational (shared)	Festival / social practice
12	Yoga	2016	Pan-Indian	Knowledge and practice
13	Kumbh Mela	2017	Several states	Festival / social practice
14	Durga Puja in Kolkata	2021	West Bengal	Festival / social practice
15	Garba of Gujarat	2023	Gujarat	Festival / social practice
16	Deepavali	2025	Pan-Indian	Festival / social practice

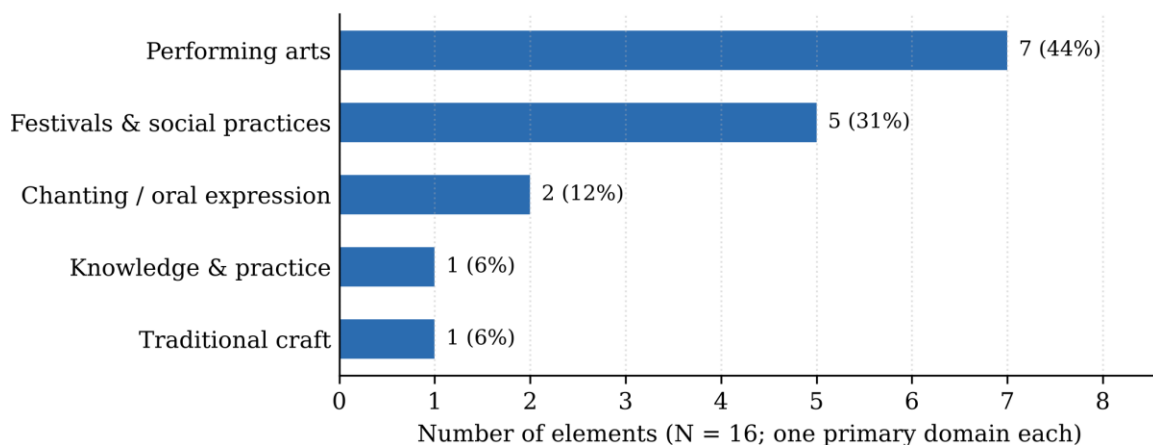
Sources: Drishti IAS (2025); PMF IAS (n.d.). Domain coding by the author. Regions are indicative; some elements are practised across several states, and not all elements are folklore in the narrow sense (Yoga, for instance, is a knowledge system).

Figure 3. Cumulative number of Indian elements on UNESCO's Representative List, 2008–2025

Source: Table 3. Inscriptions per year: 2008 (3), 2009 (1), 2010 (3), 2012 (1), 2013 (1), 2014 (1), 2016 (2), 2017 (1), 2021 (1), 2023 (1), 2025 (1).

Figure 3 shows that seven of the sixteen elements (44%) were inscribed in the first three years (2008–2010), followed by a slower pace of roughly one inscription every one to two years; six (38%) have been added since 2016. Figure 4 classifies the

elements by primary domain. Performing arts account for seven elements (44%), festivals and social practices for five (31%), chanting traditions for two (13%), and knowledge and practice and traditional craft for one each (6% each).

Figure 4. Indian UNESCO elements by primary domain (author's coding)

Source: Table 3; author's coding (N = 16).

What is absent is as telling as what is present. By title, none of the sixteen elements is a prose folktale tradition or an oral-epic tradition in the sense of Table 1, although Ramlila is a performance of an epic

and the chanting traditions are oral. Forms such as the Pabuji, Annanmar or Pandavani epics, the large body of women's songs, and the tales of tribal communities are not represented on the

international list. This does not mean that they are neglected locally, since inscription depends on state nominations and on the capacity of communities and institutions to prepare dossiers. It does indicate that international recognition is a partial and selective indicator of the folklore that is alive in India.

DISCUSSION

Folklore as performance, and the problem of the text

Following Bauman (1977), the genres in Table 1 are better regarded as events than objects. This has an important consequence for documentation. A transcribed tale or a recorded epic preserves only one performance, and the same singer will vary the text with audience and occasion. Safeguarding should therefore aim at sustaining the conditions of performance (the occasion, the patron, the apprenticeship and the community that listens) rather than at fixing the text alone.

Inequality within folklore

Folklore is not equally distributed or equally valued. Flueckiger (1996) shows how genres in central India are gendered, with certain song genres belonging to women and others to men, while Narayan (1989)

shows how stories are used strategically in religious teaching by specific teachers to specific audiences. The statistical skew of Figure 2 and the genre skew of Figure 4 point to a second inequality, that of recognition: the folklore of large language communities and of ritual and festive forms is more visible to national and international institutions than that of small communities and of narrative traditions.

Authenticity, adaptation and the cultural economy

Modern media reuse folk material in ways that bring both reach and risk. As Bendix (1997) and Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) argue, 'authentic' tradition is itself partly a product of the observers who define it. Adaptations in print, on stage, in film and online can sustain interest and create new livelihoods, but they can also detach a tradition from its custodians. The economics of this is understudied. Performers, painters and craftspeople depend on festival calendars, patronage, tourism and, increasingly, media fees. There is little systematic evidence on their incomes or on how much of the commercial value generated by folklore-based products reaches source communities. A research agenda in cultural economics, using performer surveys and valuation techniques, would help to fill that gap.

Safeguarding priorities

Table 4. Challenges to Indian folklore and possible responses

Challenge	Evidence or illustration	Possible response
Concentrated documentation by language	Eleven languages cover 92.02% of the population by first language; 19,569 raw mother-tongue returns collapse into 121 languages with 10,000+ speakers	Community-led documentation in the original language; support for archives in smaller languages
Narrative genres under-recognised	No oral-epic or prose-tale tradition among the 16 UNESCO elements, by title	State inventories and nominations that include epic and women's-song traditions
Fragile livelihoods of carriers	Performers and craftspeople depend on festivals, patronage and tourism; little systematic income data	Performer surveys; fair-fee norms; cooperatives and apprenticeship support

Challenge	Evidence or illustration	Possible response
Commodification and attribution	Folk tales travel through collectors, translators and adapters (Table 2); credit is often unclear	Credit and consent protocols; benefit-sharing with source communities
Internal inequality (gender, caste, region)	Gendered genres and unequal visibility (Flueckiger, 1996; Narayan, 1989)	Document women's and marginal communities' repertoires; include their voices in curation

Source: author's synthesis from the data and literature cited.

Table 4 summarises five challenges and possible responses. The common thread is that safeguarding must be participatory. The 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage places the communities, groups and individuals who create and maintain a tradition at the centre of identification and safeguarding, and the Indian case suggests that this principle should apply to documentation, to film and digital adaptation, and to any commercial use.

CONCLUSION

Indian folklore is a vast, living field whose forms range from tales and epics to rituals, songs, theatre and crafts. This paper has shown that it rests on an extraordinarily diverse yet highly skewed linguistic base, that it entered world literature early through frame-story collections such as the Panchatantra, and that its present international recognition is dominated by performing arts and festivals, with narrative genres notably absent. Folklore's future depends on keeping tradition-bearing communities at the centre of its documentation, its adaptation and its economic benefits.

Limitations and future research. The study relies on secondary sources and on press and educational compilations for the UNESCO list and Census tabulations; these should be verified against primary UNESCO and Census of India publications before final submission. Genre and domain coding is interpretive. Future work could add state-level inventories of folk traditions, a genre-wise survey of archives and publications, performer-income surveys, and fieldwork on the effect of media adaptation on source communities.

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