

## **Cultural Commons and its Dynamics: Empirical Insights from Cases of Traditional Performing Arts in India**

### **Abstract**

Cultural commons encompass a vast range of shareable resources, from scientific tools and expertise to cultural and creative pursuits that are increasingly threatened by capitalist ways of living. Despite scholars pointing out the usefulness of examining intangible cultural resources such as traditional performing arts, the focus has remained extensively on knowledge commons, especially those in the digital domain. To address the existing gap, this study examined three different traditional performing art forms in India, situated within specific temporal scales - transmission, decline, and revival - to gain insight into the dynamics of maintaining cultural commons. The qualitative collective case study method was adopted, as part of which data was collected using both primary and secondary techniques including in-depth interviews, participant and non-participant-observation, and archival research. The intergenerational transmission of rod puppetry in Jaynagar, West Bengal, the decline of *tawa'ifs* performing arts in Lucknow, and the revival initiatives of the Courtesan Project and the Kaavad Project, focusing on *tawa'ifs* culture and *kaavad baanchana* of Rajasthan, were studied. The study was guided by theoretical frameworks formulated using concepts from cultural commons theory, traditional performing arts and community identity, and music revival theory. The findings demonstrated that the deep-rootedness of traditional cultural commons within their socio-cultural milieux presents both obstacles and opportunities for their transmission, decline, and revival. Across the three case studies, the strategic remodelling of cultural resources to suit their evolving socio-cultural realities emerged as a critical strategy for survival, adopted by both traditional communities and revivalists. Secondly, the study documented the restructuring of traditional performing communities and the need for external intervention, indicating broader models of cultural transmission. Finally, the study demonstrated the significance of both material and non-material spaces of production to the dynamics of cultural commons. The study's significance lies in its ability to offer empirical insights into how cultural commons can endure, transform, and thrive in changing worlds.

**Keywords:** Cultural commons, culture, traditional performing arts, rod puppetry, *tawa'ifs*, *kaavad*