

Scholar Time

A Multidisciplinary Journal of Research and Development

Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, & Indexed Journal

ISSN: 2581-6489



Research Article

Open Access

Preserving Cultural Heritage through Indigenous Games: A Conceptual Review

Neetu Pathak¹,

¹Research Scholar, Central University of Punjab, Department of Physical Education, Punjab, India

Corresponding Author: Neetu Pathak

neetujoshi.pathak@gmail.com

Article Information

Received: 6 July 2026

Accepted: 27 August 2026

Published: 14 September 2026

Vol. Issue. Year Vol. 9|Issue 9| 2026| Pages: 26–33

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22741311>

How to Cite

Pathak, N.(2026). Preserving Cultural Heritage through Indigenous Games: A Conceptual Review. *Scholar Time: A Multidisciplinary Journal of Research and Development*, 9(9), 26-33. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22741311>

Copyright

©2026 The Authors. Published by Scholar Time. This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.en>

Preserving Cultural Heritage through Indigenous Games: A Conceptual Review

Neetu Pathak¹,

Abstract

Indigenous (or orally transmitted, community-based) forms of physical games are an unexplored part of the intangible cultural heritage, but play an essential role in preserving cultural continuity. This review synthesises existing literature on indigenous games as a cultural continuity medium from the perspective of game theory, the physical literacy framework and UNESCO's intangible heritage approach, and empirical research from India and the world in three main areas: digital and gamified approaches to heritage preservation, and the pedagogical and policy integration of indigenous games in school physical education (with particular reference to the Indian Knowledge Systems Initiative). The review also examines the tension between conservation and adaptation, arguing that the process of conservation itself changes traditions. The review concluded by identifying gaps in the literature (in particular the lack of longitudinal, cross-regional and classroom implementation studies on how indigenous games are taught) and by proposing avenues for future research linking PE teaching, sport science and indigenous knowledge systems to inform curricula and future intervention studies in school PE.

Keywords: indigenous games; intangible cultural heritage; physical literacy; Indian Knowledge Systems; play theory; cultural transmission; National Education Policy 2020

1 Introduction

Play is one of the oldest and most widely practiced human cultural activities: long before modern sports were codified, communities around the world had devised local, grassroots games, played with stones, sticks, ropes, seeds, and whatever else they could find. Instead of being dismissed as childish amusements, as is often the case in contemporary public discourse, these indigenous games serve as educational, ritualistic, and cultural repositories, and are threatened to disappear within a generation or two as digital entertainment, urban development, and standardized international sports take over children's and adolescents' leisure time. This threat has attracted growing scientific and political attention. Recognising that traditional games and sports are not relics of the past but living and communicable cultural expressions, international organisations, including UNESCO, have extended the notion of intangible heritage to include these games and sports. In India, the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) and the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) initiative have allowed the institutional space for indigenous games to be integrated into formal education as part of a larger national effort to align education with indigenous ways of learning and cultural continuity. Despite this growing interest, scholarship on indigenous games is fragmented across disciplines (physical education, folklore studies, sport-for-development, digital heritage studies, and, to a lesser extent, performance and cultural studies) with limited cross-disciplinary synthesis. This paper attempts to address this gap by providing a conceptual review of theoretical and empirical literature on indigenous games to clarify what is known about indigenous games as tools of cultural protection, what theoretical frameworks explain their function as tools of

cultural protection, and where the main gaps in the current knowledge are. The review will be organized around three key questions: (i) how have scholars conceptualized the relationship between games, culture and heritage, (ii) what digital, educational and policy mechanisms have been proposed or implemented to protect indigenous games, and (iii) what are the current tensions and open questions in the literature, in particular in the Indian context?

2 Theoretical Framework

Given that indigenous games are situated at the intersection of multiple distinct academic traditions, a conceptual review of this kind requires an explicit theoretical foundation. The current conversation is informed by three theoretical frameworks: play theory, the physical literacy framework, and the UNESCO-developed international heritage-safeguarding approach.

2.1 Play Theory

Johan Huizinga in his pioneering work stated that play is not just an element of culture but is a constitutive part of it, and that civilisation itself evolves in, and as, play, and never entirely escapes from it. He defined play as voluntary activity set apart from ordinary life that creates its own structure, and this concept may explain how, although indigenous games may seem trivial, they can be of great cultural and social importance to the people who play them. Brian Sutton-Smith contested this singular vision, arguing that no one theory can explain why play matters, and his influential analysis identified seven competing "rhetorics" of play: play as progress, play as communal identity, play as power, play as learning, play as therapy, play as entertainment, and play as social interaction, all of which exist in any explanation of play and sometimes conflict with one another. Such a pluralistic framework is particularly useful for the study of indigenous games, as it resists reducing traditional play to a single explanatory goal, whether developmental, educational, or merely recreational, and leaves space for the multiple meanings competitive, spiritual, communal, and pedagogical that indigenous games often simultaneously convey.

2.2 Physical Literacy

Physical literacy was first defined by Margaret Whitehead as the motivation, self-confidence, physical competence, and understanding that enable people to value and engage in physical activity for life. The concept is explicitly holistic, encompassing physical, cognitive, social and emotional dimensions, rather than simply motor skills, and Whitehead argued that physical literacy should be viewed as a cultural construct and not a universal construct (Whitehead, 2010), a position that is explicitly recognised in subsequent work on the framework, such as calls for a culturally sensitive, transnational approach to physical literacy (e.g., Chantal et al., 2014) that acknowledges that different communities develop and express physical literacy through different traditions of exercise and positions indigenous games as legitimate, culturally specific pathways to physical literacy rather than as lesser alternatives to standardised sport.

2.3 Intangible Cultural Heritage

In 2003, the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage adopted a broad definition of cultural heritage, and while the Convention initially categorized intangible heritage into five areas, subsequent practices among signatory States have expanded the recognition of traditional games and sports as a sixth category that can be protected. This formal recognition provides indigenous games scholarship with a legal and conceptual vocabulary inventorying, transmission, safeguarding, community consent that connects grassroots

pedagogical initiatives to global heritage policy. When combined, these three frameworks suggest that indigenous games should be viewed as dynamic, embodied cultural practices whose survival depends on ongoing, meaningful transmission rather than just documentation or museum-style preservation, rather than as straightforward recreational activities or static heritage objects.

3 Methodology

This paper adopts a conceptual review methodology, which is well-suited to synthesizing a literature that is thematically diverse and disciplinarily scattered, and which aims to build theoretical clarity rather than comprehensively cataloging empirical findings (unlike a systematic review, which would strive for procedural completeness by applying predetermined inclusion criteria or by using a PRISMA-style flow diagram to reveal the inclusion and exclusion of papers as part of the review process). The relevant sources were identified by a targeted search of academic databases and repositories such as Scopus and the Scientific Index, Springer and institutional repositories, combined with the search terms indigenous games, cultural heritage, physical literacy and intangible cultural heritage, and peer-reviewed journal articles published in the last decade (Huizinga; Sutton-Smith; Whitehead), whose continued impact on the field justifies inclusion irrespective of date of publication, and excluding sources without verifiable authorship or peer review status. In accordance with the conceptual-review format, the resulting body of literature was arranged thematically rather than chronologically, including theoretical framing, digital and gamified preservation strategies, pedagogical and policy integration, and developmental evidence. A final caveat should be made about this type of conceptual review: although purposive and transparent in its selection of sources, it does not follow a fully systematic or PRISMA-based search protocol, and as such the synthesis that follows should be read as an interpretive mapping of the field rather than a definitive quantitative account of the state of the evidence.

4 Global Perspectives on Indigenous Games and Cultural Preservation

There is an emerging body of international scholarship on the preservation of indigenous games, which is approached through the lens of digital technology and gamification. In her chapter on Indigenous game design and digital cultural heritage, Laiti notes that, despite the fact that digital platforms already host a significant and growing corpus of Indigenous cultural expression, relatively less effort has been dedicated to preserving the games themselves and the knowledge that they contain, and that unless Indigenous games are deliberately preserved, they may not survive for much longer than a few decades, losing with them the histories of their development and learning opportunities. Laiti also locates Indigenous game design in frameworks of Indigenous data governance, reminding us that digital preservation initiatives must be accountable to the communities whose knowledge they represent and not treat that knowledge as open extractable content. Another branch of scholarship shows similar digital approaches in other geographic contexts. A gamified educational application was created to rescue, preserve and disseminate the intangible cultural heritage of indigenous agricultural communities in Ecuador, embedding customs, celebrations, and traditional knowledge into an interactive narrative game; a usability evaluation showed positive results that support the broader claim that serious games can be used as a viable educational resource for children in their cultural education and heritage transmission (Carrión-Toro and colleagues), an argument that is consistent with the wider claim that digital and gamified me-

dia do not replace but can expand traditional play to younger, more screen-savvy generations. Another strand of the literature focuses less on preservation technology than on the representation and mobilization of indigenous games within media and policy discourse. Fabian and Giles use a discourse analysis of Canadian mainstream and Indigenous media coverage of traditional Indigenous games to identify two dominant narratives: that traditional games maintain cultural continuity and that Indigenous youth can be "saved" through participation in traditional games. Fabian and Giles also point to a conceptual tension that runs through much of the wider preservation literature, and which is echoed in Handler and Linnekin: cultural preservation efforts, no matter how careful, alter, reconstruct, or invent the very traditions they are designed to fix, because the act of preserving a practice in a contemporary context necessarily imbues it with contemporary qualities; moreover, when traditional games are incorporated into formal multi-sport events, they can move from lived, habitual experience to objects of deliberate political intervention or, as Fabian and Giles put it, a sort of "museum piece." This tension between vitality and ossification is implicit or explicit in much of the literature reviewed here and is one of the fundamental conceptual challenges facing a project of games-based heritage preservation. A third strand more directly addresses grassroots and institutional efforts, such as scholarship on traditional Filipino games which notes governmental initiatives like legislation mandating the inclusion of indigenous games in basic education curricula, but also notes that this policy recognition has not, by itself, returned such games to their former popularity, and that there remains a lack of institutions devoted specifically to teaching them, a pattern that repeats itself in many national contexts and which will have direct bearing on the Indian case in the section that follows.

5 Indigenous Games in the Indian Context

The preservation of indigenous games is a particularly rich area to study in India, given the regional diversity of its traditional play forms (games like kho-kho, kabaddi, gilli-danda, and pithoo or seven stones or lagori), as well as the recent, conscious policy efforts to re-integrate such games into formal education. The National Education Policy 2020 specifically foregrounds experiential, play-based pedagogy and calls for the inclusion of Indian Knowledge Systems into schooling. On this policy foundation, the Indian Knowledge Systems Division of the Ministry of Education has facilitated projects like Bharatiya Khel, an effort to introduce over a thousand indigenous games into schools through structured interschool competition, a sign that the pedagogical incorporation of traditional games is now being attempted more through formal state processes than left entirely to informal or voluntary dissemination. A parallel body of Indian scholarship has started to provide the conceptual and empirical basis for this policy change. Khan's thematic review puts Indian games explicitly within the Indian Knowledge System, stating that indigenous games are an integral part of the physical culture of India, which is a vital component of the heritage and traditional physical culture of India, which has developed organically, handed down from generation to generation, for recreation, physical training, and social interaction, and that indigenous games have been marginalized by modernization, globalization, and the hegemony of standardized international sport. Additional empirical work by Çinar and Hassani found physical, psychological, social, and cognitive benefits to school-aged children who were exposed to traditional games in a structured way, providing quantitative evidence that indigenous games serve as culturally relevant and effective pathways to physical literacy, rather than as antiquated curricular add-ons. Kumar, Pant, Thomas, and Yadav also argue that embedding indigenous games into the educational framework presents a powerful opportunity to enhance physical literacy and thus long-term sporting success, as these games, rooted in cultural heritage and community values, develop coordination, agility, and teamwork while also enhancing cultural identity and social

cohesion. Dar and Giri take this argument further into the policy domain and specifically into the realm of curricular implementation by arguing that, beyond the informal revival of indigenous games, curricular integration (as outlined under the National Education Policy 2020) is now viewed as the most viable mechanism for sustaining preservation in the Indian system. This body of scholarship taken together suggests that the field is maturing but still emerging: while the alignment between indigenous games and national education reform is clearly established, there is comparatively less evidence available of classroom-level implementation, teacher preparedness, or the long-term retention of these games once introduced through formal curricula (echoing the pattern identified above in the Philippine context).

6 Cognitive and Developmental Dimensions

In addition to their cultural and educational value, indigenous games have also been studied for their measurable effects on children's physical activity and social interaction, and findings such as those of Manzari Tavakoli, Shojaei and Norouzi, who examined the impact of indigenous games on cognitive function, physical literacy and academic achievement in children aged eight to 12, using a four-step design of pre- and post-test and ex-test indigenous games. This new literature strengthens the instrumental and cultural case for preserving indigenous games: not only a heritage to be preserved in its own right, but also a proven educational resource with documented positive effects on physical literacy, cognitive function, and social skills development in culturally diverse and resource-poor school environments, such as India.

7 Tensions and Critical Perspectives

While the literature examined above is generally optimistic about the preservation potential of domestic games, there are some tensions that deserve critical attention rather than mere support. The first is the paradox of conservation itself: the act of protecting a tradition by codifying it - by standardizing curricula, competitive formatting, or digital encoding - necessarily changes it, and the question remains: how much change can a play withstand before it ceases to convey the cultural meaning it was intended to convey? A related concern also expressed in Laiti's focus on Indigenous data governance is the potential for digital preservation projects to extract or repackage indigenous cultural knowledge without sufficient community consent, benefit-sharing, or sustained collaboration by external researchers, educators, or technologists. The second tension is between political recognition and educational infrastructure: As the cases of the Philippines and India show, even when a domestic game has formal government or educational support, this does not ensure sustained classroom practice, trained instructors, and long-term student involvement (political visibility is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for genuine cultural remittances). A third tension, more specific to the Indian context, relates to regional and linguistic diversity: the variety of Indigenous games within India varies by state, community, and language group, and centralized curricular initiatives run the risk of privileging a standardized or majority selection of games at the expense of more localized or minority traditions (a concern that resonates with the broader critical literature on decolonization and Indigenous knowledge in sport and physical education, although this particular literature has, to date, been more developed in North American and African contexts than in South Asian scholarship).

8 Research Gaps and Directions for Future Research

These gaps, identified by this conceptual review, include the lack of longitudinal research (most of the available studies, including much of the Indian evidence reviewed here, are based

on a short-term pre- and post-test design), the lack of comparative, cross-regional analysis (linking Indian studies of indigenous play to parallel works from Africa, Latin America, indigenous North America, and Oceania, which seem to be developing largely in isolation from each other), the lack of classroom and pedagogical details (relatively little research on teacher training and preparation for the provision of native games within the formal PE curriculum, or on validated assessment tools to measure the gains in physical literacy attributed to native games, in particular, over the course of school years), and the lack of biometric or neurophysiological measures (relatively few studies use biometric or neurophysiological measures, such as EEG-based cognitive performance assessments, along with standardized physical literacy and motor skills in a single domestic game intervention, leaving open questions about the exact physiological and cognitive mechanisms underlying the reported developmental benefits). Well-designed, school-based intervention studies addressing these gaps are a major opportunity for future research in PE and sports science.

9 Conclusion

Indigenous games occupy a unique space where play, physical education, and intangible cultural heritage converge, and this conceptual review has contended that their preservation is best understood not as a matter of static documentation but as an ongoing, community-accountable process of cultural transmission, one that is both enabled and complicated by digital technology, formal education policy, and international heritage frameworks. In the case of India, where this process is inscribed within the National Education Policy 2020 and the Indian Knowledge Systems Initiative, there is a good deal of promise but also a still nascent evidence base in terms of classroom learning and long-term outcomes, and more research is required, particularly school-based, longitudinal intervention studies that combine physical literacy, motor skills and cognitive outcomes, to build a more robust and evidence-based understanding of how to safeguard indigenous games as living, meaningful and pedagogically effective practices rather than as static curricula.

Acknowledgements

None.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest associated with this article.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

The authors declare that artificial intelligence tools were used for language improvement and/or formatting assistance. The authors take full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, interpretation, and final content of the article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

ORCID iDs

Neetu Pathak: XXXX-XXXX-XXXX-XXXX

References

- Carrión-Toro, M., Morales-Martínez, D., Galindo, J., Salazar, A., & Santórum, M. (2026). Andean culture in play: Preserving intangible heritage through a gamified application. In M. V. Garcia, J. P. Reyes, C. Nuñez, & C. Gordón-Gallegos (Eds.), *Proceedings of the International Conference on Computer Science, Electronics and Industrial Engineering (CSEI 2024) (Lecture Notes in Networks and Systems, Vol. 1532)*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-98890-5-5>
- Çinar, M., & Hassani, F. (2026). The effects of traditional games on physical literacy among school-aged children. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 7. doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2025.1759890
- Dar, T. A., & Giri, A. S. (2026). Bridging tradition and education: Integrating indigenous games into school and higher education curricula under NEP 2020. *International Journal of Economic, Business, Accounting, Agriculture Management and Sharia Administration*, 5(6). <https://doi.org/10.54443/ijebas.v5i6.5032>
- Fabian, T., & Giles, A. R. (2023). Reviving culture and reclaiming youth: Representations of traditional Indigenous games in mainstream Canadian and Indigenous media. *Journal of Sport for Development*, 11(1).
- Huizinga, J. (1949). *Homo Ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Khan, D. S. (2023). Indigenous games and Indian culture: A conceptual and educational analysis. *Journal of Science Innovations and Nature of Earth*. <https://doi.org/10.59436/jsiane.441.2583-2093>
- Khan, S. (2026). Traditional Indian games within the Indian Knowledge System: A thematic review of regional variations and

- physical education relevance. *Integrated Journal for Research in Arts and Humanities*, 6(2), 259265.
- Kumar, S., Pant, M., Thomas, K. M., & Yadav, H. (2025). Inculcating physical literacy through indigenous games: A key to sporting achievement. *Integrated Journal for Research in Arts and Humanities*, 5(2), 267272. <https://doi.org/10.55544/ijrah.5.2.34>
- Laiti, O. K. (2025). Indigenous game design and digital cultural heritage. In I. A. Linkola-Aikio, P. Keskitalo, R. Ballardini, & M. Sarantou (Eds.), *Digital Indigenous cultural heritage*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-76941-2-6>
- Manzari Tavakoli, M. H., Shojaei, M., & Norouzi, K. (2021). Effects of local indigenous games on cognitive function, physical literacy, and academic achievement among children aged 8 to 12 years. *Motor Behaviour*, 13(3), 333354. doi.org/10.22059/jmlm.2021.327002.1593
- Ministry of Education, Government of India. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. Government of India.
- Sutton-Smith, B. (1997). *The ambiguity of play*. Harvard University Press.
- UNESCO. (2003). *Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.
- Whitehead, M. (2001). The concept of physical literacy. *European Journal of Physical Education*, 6(2), 127138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1740898010060205>
- Whitehead, M. (Ed.). (2010). *Physical literacy: Throughout the life course*. Routledge.