



## Intangible Cultural Heritage Inventory-Making and the Establishment of Information Systems: Initiatives from India\*

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The world around us is getting transformed at a fast pace. Before you know, the old market place gives way to the mall; the traditional sari is swapped for a pair of Levi's's jeans and the aroma of freshly made sambar in the morning is replaced by Kellogg's corn flakes. They say that there are about seven thousand languages spoken in this planet, but many of them are disappearing so fast that a language is wiped out every two weeks! Even the character of those languages, expressions and traditions that survive undergo such changes—in their setting, format and value, that they do not appear to be the same anymore. Preserving them in museums as exhibits, selling them as products in shops, or displaying them in artificial environments ('traditional' dances in public ceremonial functions) do not make them sustain, for the real ones are out there, fading away as memory. And this experience is universal. When there is a reference to heritage, suddenly the image that looms is that of a tangible structure, like an ancient monument, temple, excavated site or similar old edifice. An old folk song, an ancient custom, an elder's knowledge on herbs or an old technique making boats is not usually reckoned as 'heritage'.

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In recent years, there is a growing concern across the world that our living or 'intangible' heritage is under threat of dissolution, rapid change and gradual disappearance. The force of globalisation, lack of resources for protection, de-contextualised representations, impact of insensitive tourism and loss of connections for the youth contributes to such a situation. Moreover, the safeguarding of social processes does not merely include their documentation or display, but the sustenance of creativity, recognition and legal protection of rights of communities in some cases, their re-creation and revitalization and transmission to the next generation.

There is a gradual risk of disappearance of intangible heritage across the world due to the homogenizing forces of globalisation. As a worldwide effort to safeguard and promote intangible heritage, UNESCO drew up the Convention of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003. The Convention lays down regional, national and international framework for the safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH).

The scope of safeguarding intangible heritage is very broad, particularly for countries like India that have highly diverse, multi-cultural heritage. Every area, every community across the world has a different tradition, a different need and a different capacity. The value of heritage must be perceived in the light of new potential uses in these changing contexts. India's cultural heritage is the outcome of the intermingling of diverse, yet rich cultural streams through a process of assimilation and transmission down centuries. Given the pluralistic nature of Indian culture, it has to be ensured that ICH is fostered and promoted in a way that contributes to strengthening respect for diverse cultural traditions and identities, and to promoting tolerance and creativity.

## Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage in India

India is the repository of an astounding wealth of intangible heritage with distinctive qualities of its own. It reflects the intermingling of diverse, yet rich cultural streams through a process of assimilation that has today given it its special pluralistic character. Intangible heritage gets expressed in multiple ways, in the language of myth and ritual, artistic activities, knowledge systems, technologies and ways of living. India has a wide range of traditional knowledge systems, folklore, performing arts, festivals and a wide range of

artistic activities. With about eight hundred dialects and more than twenty officially recognized languages, several faiths, practices, various styles of art, architecture, literature, music and dance, and several lifestyles from the urban and rural to the tribal, few countries in the world have as diverse and rich an intangible heritage as that of India.

With the diversity of cultural expressions in India, a crucial step in documentation and safeguarding is the development of an inventory of its cultural resources. Mapping and documentation of cultural resources is all the more necessary, given the fact that heritage is frequently defined only in terms of monuments and built spaces and that the rich wealth is dispersed, with many expressions still in undocumented forms. Intangible heritage, including traditional crafts, music and festivals that constitute local cultural landscapes, needs a fresh boost if it is to continue serving as a source of social cohesion in the advent of globalization and to support livelihood in the contemporary context.

In this context, it was felt that inventory is useful.

- As a tool for protecting heritage
- For heightening the value and respect for elements of heritage
- For providing information, aiding documentation and enhancing access to heritage
- For transmitting and disseminating knowledge on aspects of heritage
- For creating a network of institutions and persons on related areas of knowledge and heritage
- For supporting knowledge application and research

In view of the above, UNESCO New Delhi in consultation with a group of experts developed a model for an inventory for the Government of India to take up mapping and documentation on a vast scale. The funding for the initiative came from the Intangible Cultural Heritage Centre for the Asia and the Pacific, Republic of Korea.

The objectives for the initiative were to

- 1) Develop methodologies and a format/template for the inventorying of cultural resources in the area of tangible and intangible heritage and cultural institutions; and

- 2) Design a web-based inventory of cultural resources enabling each State/ district/ panchayat to collect, store and publicize up-to-date information on cultural heritage and related institutions existing in its territory.

In creating a common template and developing a web-based public database to be filled-in under the responsibility of each State Government, district and/or panchayat, a decentralized mechanism was envisaged, to ensure implementation of the inventory-making process in an efficient manner, thus strengthening the capacity of local bodies to identify, protect, preserve and enhance heritage. It called for a minimum standard for data collection among inventories of the same domain and provided a platform for each State/ district/ panchayat to publicize its cultural wealth in a holistic manner to highlight its cultural diversity and identity for social cohesion and sustainable tourism development.

After finalizing the design and establishment of an architecture for a database driven web portal linking information on intangible heritage, tangible heritage and related cultural institutions, a pilot project was started with a couple of selected State(s) for the collection of information and testing of the data-base structure and web-portal architecture. For purposes of feasibility, a horizontally structured State-wise mapping of cultural resources was found suitable, though there is ample scope for a vertical layer with community-based mapping. Since India has a large and undocumented wealth of heritage expressions scattered throughout the country, naturally questions regarding the attempts at comprehensiveness versus limited representative data also came up. More important were issues pertaining to access, identity, authenticity and IPR. For example, what should be the category of information for each template, and what is the level at which it should be pitched? In the area of intangible heritage, should the template include, for instance, a list of practitioners? In the area of traditional music, should the template also provide detail on the type of musical instruments? What level of detail should the template provide, bearing in mind, once again, that the present cultural mapping exercise does not pretend to be a thorough academic survey but rather an overview of and introduction to local cultures? How many templates do we need to develop? In the area of intangible heritage, for instance, should there be one template each for dance, music, oral tradition and theatre, or could they be grouped under one template of 'performing arts' with subdivisions within? What classification system should be used in the area of oral traditions, music and dances (e.g. 'classical' 'folk',

‘popular’, ‘tribal’ etc.)? Is there any established or widely utilized method of classification? For crafts, is it appropriate to classify per material (e.g. textile, natural fibre, metal, wood) or per technique (e.g. embroidery, dying, woodcarving, basketry, cire-perdue etc)?

This also brought the project to the next level of investigation, as to the modality for surveying/collecting information, and the ensuring of the participation of local community in the mapping exercise.

While there are several potential domains for inventory, the project was limited to the following areas:

- Tangible Heritage: Individual monuments; group of monuments; areas; landscapes
- Intangible Heritage: Crafts, performing arts (including music, dance, theatre, oral traditions), festivals
- Cultural Institutions: Museums

Accordingly, templates were prepared for five domains including

- Heritage Places
- Performances and Oral Traditions
- Crafts
- Festive Events
- Museums

It was felt that once the template was evolved, before making it universal, it needs to be tested on the ground with inputs for each heritage domain, on an actual area. Accordingly, a pilot project was given to SAHA: Stirring Action on Heritage and the Arts, an institution based in New Delhi, to take up work in Kerala, a State in the south-west part of India. A team of eight persons collected information on seven expressions each and the draft template was prepared.

While working on the template, several questions came up, including broad ones regarding the mapping itself and more specific ones about the template structure. The extent of details to be given for each expression was a pertinent issue. What is the level of pitching of each entry? Though the mapping does not pretend to be an academic exercise, should it provide a mere introductory information, or should there be more detailed? Given

the diversity of cultural expressions, many are too widely known, perhaps globally, while for many others there is not even first-hand information. The other issue pertains to access. Many bearers of heritage were ambivalent and sometimes reluctant to share information, though some others welcomed the initiative. Regarding the template, the specificity of categorizations was a problem while addressing questions. Many expressions were simultaneously event, performing art, oral tradition, ritual and entertainment, and there was considerable overlapping of domains. The varying standards of entries in terms of elaboration or abridgement, was also a matter of concern.

However, in spite of these concerns and practical difficulties, the exercise was found to be effective on the ground, and with minor alterations of the template was found feasible for wide usage. It demonstrated that there is an urgent need to draw up inventories on aspects relating to intangible cultural heritage, protect communities and tradition-bearers in efforts of preservation and sustenance of relevant aspects of heritage, pool in the efforts of documentation by providing/catalysing resources, support training and transmission, and take up steps for their revitalization and transmission. Many of the existing efforts by different groups, institutions and individuals across India need to be fostered and re-evaluated in terms of significance, priority and benefit to the community and the world at large. It is a shared responsibility that cannot be left to the government but to be organized through a collaboration of local effort, coordinated academic resource support and catalysed by visionary social responsibility.

I would like to use this occasion to highlight another initiative as work in progress being taken up by SAHA: Stirring Action on Heritage and the Arts. This initiative, titled 'Sahapedia' is intended as a web portal on Indian heritage, both tangible and intangible. Sahapedia seeks to be a comprehensive searchable website specifically on Indian and broadly South Asian cultural heritage which would be universally accessible to interested persons around India and the world to search and use, as well as a space in which to contribute their knowledge.

Sahapedia's radical open-ness enjoins all interested persons to contribute vital knowledge on both well known and, perhaps more importantly, lesser known forms that comprise India's treasure trove of culture. An ideal user of Sahapedia, therefore, would both use it as a resource as well as contribute her own knowledge of Indian heritage. The portal seeks to provide a collaborative forum for academics, researchers, general readers and practitioners to create information on heritage. Particularly, it seeks to include students at every

level of research/their studies as well as the more general reader who wants to know about India (and indeed South Asia) for a variety of reasons.

At the initial stage, Sahapedia provides entries on the following categories:

- 1) Indian literature and knowledge systems
- 2) Performing arts
- 3) Heritage sites / spaces
- 4) Festive events
- 5) Craft traditions
- 6) Museums

Further, given that a number of cultural forms may be found across South Asia, across modern national boundaries, Sahapedia will eventually expand its focus beyond Indian national boundaries to South Asia. To take an example, Qawwali as a musical form is found all over north India and Pakistan. Another example is Baul singing, which is performed both in West Bengal and across the border in Bangladesh.

One of the key objectives of the website are to provide useful, practical information regarding access to the forms under discussion – whether literature, museums, craft practices and other forms of cultural expression. The aim is also to provide a certain standard of information on a large number of forms which is beyond the basic level and provide enough leads for a researcher or conservationist or heritage manager to take forward or use. In the process, owing to it being web-based and its universal accessibility, it would become a platform for a number of lesser-known forms from remote or inadequately documented places in the country. Finally, Sahapedia aims to involve a large number of people in generating information on Indian/South Asian cultural heritage. In the process, information will be disseminated and we see this as an important step in heritage conservation. The content would be generated by online communities who write entries, and add and edit pages entirely voluntarily. The volunteers may be based anywhere in the world and would have a certain level of knowledge on various aspects of Indian culture. The content will be collaborative i.e. content will be edited by other members of the community with the idea that the more the edits on a single entry, the more balanced, informative and meaningful will be the piece of information. The content will be verifiable with references and lists for further reading provided. Sahapedia will not ask for original information or research

but instead encourages that existing resources be used to create balanced entries. Content-generation is based on trust and the belief that encyclopedia information can be provided free and can be generated by interested volunteers around the world. Hypertext i.e. external links and information on other references and information would be provided as much as possible/available elsewhere on the website. This is crucial to making the site more user-friendly (since users may directly follow the threads of information that interest them most), as well as efficient (since it prevents repetition of content, makes connections between entries and provides a single-stop resource for most users).

There is considerable global interest today on Indian knowledge systems and cultural practices. There is as yet, rather surprisingly, no single-window (encyclopedic) reference site on the web that provides reliable and wide-ranging information on Indian heritage and knowledge systems. Given the way the world today sees India as a cultural reservoir, it is felt that there is an urgency to respond to the task of compiling an omnibus internet-searchable knowledge portal on Indian heritage.