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South Asia

Regional Collaboration for Safeguarding ICH:

Overview, Tasks, and Strategies with Special Reference to
India, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives

Shubha CHAUDHURI
Secretary-General
Executive Director
American Institute of Indian Studies

As we all know, the importance of intangible cultural heritage has been greatly enhanced since the 2003 Convention though the forms we are talking about are old if not ancient in many cases, and the individuals who have worked in the arts with what was called ‘expressions of folklore’ were involved in efforts to preserve and transmit these traditions. However, the 2003 Convention, which has at its centre the aim of safeguarding, has helped bring these issues to the centre, resulting in debate and the need to define the ‘intangible’.

I am discussing these issues not only as one who works in this area but as one providing perspective from India, from the standpoint of an archivist who is involved in the documentation, preservation, and dissemination of forms of intangible cultural heritage, including music, oral traditions, rituals, and other forms of performance.¹ Though this is an attempt at providing an overview of the status of the Convention, my aim will be to deal with the spirit rather than the

¹ Though my experience is limited to India, this paper is based on input from Moe Chiba of the UNESCO New Delhi office for an overview of issues from Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, which fall under their aegis.

letter of the Convention.

A brief overview of the status of implementing the ICH Convention in the countries under discussion follows.

Bhutan

Bhutan is a small Himalayan kingdom with a rich heritage. At this time, there is no specific legislation that deals with ICH, though a request was made for assistance in creating national legislation.

A beginning has been made towards creating a preliminary online database of Bhutan heritage by the Institute of Language and Culture Studies (ILCS) with support from UNESCO. An inventory of rituals has also been carried out by the Institute.

Being a small country, Bhutan generally has limited human and institutional capacities. The Royal Academy of Performing Arts, which has been identified as the nodal technical agency for the Convention, is primarily a training institution for performing arts.

The new constitution of Bhutan as well as the Gross National Happiness, however, puts emphasis on protecting heritage and culture as part of the country's holistic development. The Centre for Bhutan Studies is charged with the responsibility of promoting and increasing information and knowledge of the concept of Gross National Happiness. Among its programmes of publications and seminars, a seminar on media and culture seems to have been the beginning point for discussing various ICH elements.

Bhutan has one element inscribed on the Representative List—the Mask Dance of the Drums from Drametse.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is an island nation in the Indian Ocean, and it has an ancient and rich heritage, including a vast range of ICH. However, there is as yet no national legislation for implementing the 2003 Convention.

National Inventory

A website on the intangible cultural heritage of Sri Lanka is being maintained at <http://www.natlib.lk/inhe/>. This project was started with the assistance of UNESCO in September 2008. The Intangible Cultural Heritage National Committee was set up, and it includes scholars from the field of anthropology and other disciplines who have expertise in fields related to ICH. The National Library and the Documentation Services Board work as conveners. As an initial step, data related to ICH elements were collected from the materials housed at the National Archives. The intention is to expand in the future to cover the whole island and to collect, preserve, and make available data related to ICH in Sri Lanka.

Safeguarding

In 2009, with partnership of the ACCU, under the International Partnership Programme for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, the Training Course for Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage was carried out.

This was an island-wide, national programme launched by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs and National Heritage and the Department of Cultural affairs.

Objectives of the Project

The primary objective of this project is to create an island-wide programme for safeguarding ICH in Sri Lanka. The specific objectives of the project are to

- identify the different kinds of ICH
- categorise and safeguard ICH according to geographical regions
- investigate the background of cultural diffusion that has taken place for ICH
- examine the cultural changes and their impact on ICH
- understand the social and cultural issues for safeguarding ICH
- prepare and maintain an inventory for future generations

Under this project, a pilot survey was carried out in eight of the nine provinces of the country.

Maldives

The Maldives, a small island nation in the Indian Ocean, is currently in the process of ratifying the 2003 Convention. Preliminary discussions have begun between the Ministry and UNESCO to reflect on the purpose and the nature of the national inventory and the modalities involved in implementing the Convention as well as technical assistance to create national legislation.

As a very isolated country, the Maldives needs assistance in training and implementation through creation of a cultural management group. There are at this time, few institutions that can participate in inventorying and safeguarding programmes. The Department of Heritage was formed in 2011, and one of its major assignments is to promote and preserve ICH.

India

India is the largest country in the subcontinent and the region with a great range and number of ICH elements and ancient heritage in these areas as well. There have been many governmental and non-governmental agencies working in the heritage safeguarding field, even prior to the 2003 Convention. It is perhaps because of this rich and complex tapestry of traditions and the multitude of agencies and institutions that there is no nodal agency identified by the government of India to implement the Convention or charged with the responsibility of carrying out the national inventory.

Aspects of Implementation

Inventorying

Though there is no official national inventory, there are multiple inventories at the state, regional, and national level, in various stages of detail and completion at this time. These are being prepared and maintained by governmental and non-governmental agencies, as has been mentioned earlier.

Cultural Atlas

An attempt to create a cultural atlas of India, including tangible and intangible cultural heritage, has been under way by the UNESCO New Delhi Office. To this end, templates were designed for monuments, spaces, crafts, performing arts, and folklore as well as for events such as fairs and festivals. The intention has been to create an online space that would work with a wiki model so that various agencies could input data along with audio, video, and image files.

Safeguarding

As in the case of inventorying, many agencies and institutions are involved in safeguarding and preserving ICH though not always the Convention. The government institutions, such as the Sangeet Natak Akademi, the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, and various agencies under the Ministry of Culture, carry out various programmes aimed at safeguarding ICH through the promotion and preservation as well as the transmission of ICH elements. At the non-governmental level, there are national and state level institutions working towards safeguarding.

Nomination

India has been active in nominating elements for inscription on the Representative List. At this time, the inscribed elements are: Kutiyattam; Ramlila; Vedic Chanting; Navroze (multinational); Ramman, Chhau Dance; Kalbelia; and Mudiyettu.

Issues and Challenges in Implementing the 2003 Convention

Though the countries discussed in this region are not at all equal in size, infrastructure, or capacity, there are a few issues that emerge. As mentioned in the introduction, though the practice of ICH and attempts to preserve and safeguard may be much older than the Convention, there is no doubt that the Convention has brought the issues regarding ICH to the forefront, given them a place in governmental structures, and provided a vocabulary and concepts that are appropriate to it. Given that, there is a need to recognise the differences in the

culture of governance and the institutional and educational infrastructure of each country that may make it difficult to apply one formula to all.

To address the issues and challenges, it would be useful to review the Convention and its basic aims. As is known, the basic aim of the Convention from which it takes its name is *safeguarding*. And thus if we look at the key safeguarding measures in the *convention*, they are listed as

- Inventorying : Presenting information on ICH elements in a systematic way
- Raising Awareness: Encouraging people to understand and appreciate ICH
- Revitalising: Strengthening endangered ICH

Inventorying: Pros and Cons

If we review reports and case studies on implementing the Convention, we find that inventorying plays a major role. This is understandable as a national inventory is an obligation of all States Parties who are signatories to the Convention. UNESCO does not, however, provide a template or model inventory.

The aim of inventorying is to identify elements of ICH in a systematic way to create a baseline document, if we may call it that, and to be able to then create strategies to create respect, increase awareness, and appreciate all elements in an inclusive fashion. To prevent this from being a top-down exercise, the Convention has further added the requirement that the inventorying be community based and that it involves prior informed consent.

If we then begin inventorying by attempting to collate and combine existing inventories and databases in various countries, we may find that the data collected may not fulfil these criteria and thus perhaps not find a place in a national inventory. Creating a community-based inventory that includes community members needs the assembly of a large task force that can work in each region or province, state, and town or city, being inclusive. Those who have been involved in any ethnographic fieldwork will be aware of the extent of this work if we are to collect data from each community and cultural group and the elements that make up ICH.

- (a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the ICH
- (b) performing arts
- (c) social practices, rituals and festive events
- (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe
- (e) traditional craftsmanship

As there is freedom under the Convention, each country must decide to what extent such an inventory must go. There are also inherent issues in an inventory that is community based as the very definition of community is broad as it needs to be and thus the representation of a *community* or group or even an individual is allowed. Identifying the appropriate leader or representative requires sensitivity and time—and a need to understand community dynamics, which may not always be feasible. Inventorying can also include the idea of cultural ownership and shared ownership, which are often contested and, much like ICH, fluid and changing.

Finally, inventorying at the national and state level is subject to bureaucratic structures and mechanisms that may lead to fixing the otherwise ever-changing nature of ICH elements that need to be flexible if they are to be kept alive and vital.

It is, however, important to point out that it is not only the process of inventorying that carries with it the risk of freezing traditions. Any form or official recognition, whether through broadcasting, festivals, or competitions, carries the same risks.

The issue of rights and permissions is a complex one, and in many situations, free prior and informed consent may be difficult to procure and thus is often implemented in the letter rather than the spirit. There are many elements, such as festivals, where there is no representative who can provide consent or permission.

There is thus a danger that by its very aims, size, and extent, the process of inventorying may become an end in itself, not allowing time and resources for the core purpose of safeguarding.

Inventorying and Nomination and other definitions

Though the process of inventorying is a precursor to nomination, the issue of

inscribing elements to the Representative List seems to become the centre of the Convention in public perception. Often the emphasis on implementation is on nomination rather than inventorying or safeguarding. Though the Convention defines ICH as living heritage that is being practised and changing, the most common misunderstanding seems to be that nomination can be used to revive forms that are dying or have ceased to exist or to fix them.

Safeguarding

Apart from the key safeguarding measures discussed earlier, the Convention also lists the following measures that are part of safeguarding.

- (a) adopt a general policy aimed at promoting the function of the intangible cultural heritage in society and at integrating the safeguarding of such heritage into planning programmes
- (b) designate or establish one or more competent bodies for safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage present in its territory
- (c) foster scientific, technical, and artistic studies as well as research methodologies with a view to safeguard intangible cultural heritage effectively, in particular the intangible cultural heritage in danger
- (d) adopt appropriate legal, technical, administrative, and financial measures aimed at
 - (i) fostering the creation or strengthening of institutions for training in the management of the intangible cultural heritage and the transmission of such heritage through forums and spaces intended for the performance or expression thereof
 - (ii) ensuring access to the intangible cultural heritage while respecting customary practices governing access to specific aspects of such heritage
 - (iii) establishing documentation institutions for intangible cultural heritage and facilitating access to them

These critical aspects of the Convention, which are the critical aspects and

long-term policies, such as research and documentation, designation, and development of institutions, and the creation of heritage policies as part of national planning, get less attention than they deserve.

Safeguarding and Development

In the region under discussion, though the resources and existing cultural infrastructure may vary, it is clear that the needs are similar.

- Create and or identify appropriate institutions or organisations
- Train and build capacity for carrying out inventories
- Make national policies and legislation for implementing the ICH Convention
- Introduce programmes for promoting, preserving, and transmitting ICH
- Research and document ICH
- Find funding

A major aspect for promoting, preserving, and transmitting in countries like India is linked to sustainability and livelihood of practitioners. This is particularly important in the context of changing socio-economic factors, such as the tapering of traditional patronage systems. Creating a workforce equipped to participate in such programmes on behalf of communities need education and capacity building, all of which are perhaps best served if policies for safeguarding ICH are linked to development initiatives.

Suggestions and Recommendation - Collaborations

There are on-going collaborations in the region through various agencies and the new initiative from UNESCO through capacity-building workshops in the region will certainly bring some uniformity to the training and lay a base for policies and programmes.

A few examples of such programmes are: the Traditional Knowledge Digital Library in India, which is providing support to similar initiatives in the region,

and the Craft Revival Trust with its online database of craft traditions that has extended its website to include Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Laos, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

There is a lot of scope for collaboration in training and projects. A relatively isolated island nation such as the Maldives could certainly gain from collaborative programmes with the Pacific region.

Bhutan shares heritage with other Himalayan states in India, which could form the basis of creating matrices for safeguarding.

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