
Discussion

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Context

The time is opportune for nations across the world to take up the cause of safeguarding intangible heritage, for there is a growing awareness and renewed interest worldwide, as evidenced by UNESCO's initiative to develop the 2003 Convention as a standard-setting instrument for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

The intangible form of heritage pertains to ideas, practices, beliefs, and values shared by a group or community over long stretches of time. While it is the crystallised experience from the past, it is also an on-going dialogue with the present, connecting the past and present through the bond of shared cultural values handed through generations. This paper discusses the diversity and richness of intangible heritage in the South Asian region and the ways to strengthen it as a shared cultural resource with differences in identities and expression.

Overview

In South Asia, there are countless expressions of intangible heritage with distinct features, varying from community to community, village to village, and area to area. The expressions of heritage take a multiplicity of forms like fairs and festivals, worship and ritual as well as games, plays, and arts and crafts. There are countless expressions of intangible heritage expressed in mythology, folklore, worship patterns, festivals, fairs, and the arts. Apart from culture-specific expressions, intangible heritage in South Asia has pan-Asian traditions not confined to a particular nation, locality, genre, or category, but as multiple forms, levels, and versions interlinked yet independent from one another. For example, the tradition of the epic Ramayana cuts across national boundaries and finds expression all over the region, including Bhutan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Nepal, and Thailand. The epic has multiple forms and variant versions, and it has been adapted into a rich variety of songs, dances, theatrical presentations, narratives, paintings, film, and television productions—all of which coexist to contribute to a common Asian heritage. As another example, the tradition of Sufi music is prevalent in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

Tasks Involved in Safeguarding ICH

Given the multiplicity and complexity of intangible heritage in the region, programmes for revitalisation have so far been too dispersed and isolated. Existing safeguarding programmes are scarce, and therefore, a broader approach for safeguarding intangible heritage is being visualised here.

The tasks to be addressed are

- Conceptualising a well-defined policy to increase involvement in the revitalisation of intangible cultural heritage culture: existing multilateral regional networks may be used as forums to address common concerns. (For example, the symposium on folk dances in which five countries participated was organised by the SAARC Cultural Centre was held in Bangladesh in October)

- Documenting varied cultural heritage elements would require the pooling in all the efforts through networking and communication
- Encouraging people (different groups, communities, regions, and disciplines) of each cultural domain require to sustain their traditions with a strong emphasis on documenting the cultural heritage by drawing up priority areas and promoting safeguarding
- Creating registries of ICH items could be operationalized through networking with several institutions and creating national, state, and local committees with the involvement of all the stakeholders mentioned above
- Deploying well-trained personnel in the respective fields who can work with communities for perpetuating their unique wisdom, traditional knowledge, and other expressions of intangible cultural heritage. There is an urgent need for implementing heritage management courses that emphasise the humanities and social sciences
- Creating regional, national, and local databases on intangible cultural heritage by networking with national and local institutions with the active involvement of the government and its affiliate bodies, NGOs, private sector organisations, elders, women, youth, and interested laypeople, with a special focus on promoting the role of women as custodians of intangible cultural heritage
- Sustaining large-scale support for custodians of heritage and voluntary organisations and allowing them the necessary freedom of expression
- Promoting creativity pertaining to ICH and fostering enjoyment within society by organising public events, fairs, and festivals and by giving awards to leading craftspeople through cultural exchange programmes and providing opportunities for performances and presentations at national and international levels to preserve heritage as living traditions
- Encouraging the youth to foster their heritage, consciously integrating courses related to intangible heritage into the learning practices at school, and encouraging student participation as interactive modules, supporting training, performance, and research on vital aspects of intangible cultural heritage
- Putting into practice national policies and an overarching legislative framework for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage

- Sensitising the media to play an important role in creating worldwide consciousness and giving more space to cultural issues
- Promoting the tourism industry to play a healthy role with an approach towards preserving cultural heritage and not exploiting it

Strategies for South Asia

To implement the 2003 Convention effectively, safeguarding plans have to start at the regional and national levels. Countries may be encouraged to prepare a concerted action plan with the following deliverables.

- Creating a regional resource centre and affiliated national centres with involvement of the government and its affiliate bodies, NGOs, community participants, representatives of educational institutions, and practitioners
- Creating national inventories through a multi-tracking system (surveys, mapping, research, and referencing)
- Documenting using IT tools and A/V resources
- Instituting awards and recognition to heritage bearers and supporting them to continue their activity
- Promoting financial and operational support to NGOs working in the sector through linking them with public and private funding and resources
- Introducing heritage management courses as professional training mechanisms and heritage education courses in schools and colleges for fostering ICH with opportunities for training, performance, and research
- Facilitating access to cultural expressions through organising public events, fairs, and festivals
- Developing an effective legal instrument for acknowledging and protecting the intangible cultural heritage of the South Asian region

Strategies for ICHCAP

ICHCAP, being an institution mandated by UNESCO to forge efforts on ICH

safeguarding in the Asia-Pacific region, needs to encourage the following activities

- Facilitate the networking of regional and national bodies by disseminating information and organising exchange programmes on different activities linked to action plans for ICH safeguarding
- Create opportunities for creating inventories through advocacy, training, and support
- Institute documentation strategies through facilitation, training, and access to best practices
- Support transnational and regional research, practice, and training
- Create platforms for developing heritage education to disseminate and exchange ideas
- Disseminate guidelines and training for developing expertise on submissions for UNESCO Representative and Urgent Safeguarding Lists
- Develop guidelines for protecting IPR relating to ICH

Sahapedia: An Open, Online Encyclopaedia on Indian and Asian Cultural Heritage

Sahapedia is planned as a comprehensive, open, multilingual, encyclopaedic web resource on Indian (and more broadly, South Asian) culture and heritage. The three goals of Sahapedia are to inform, educate, and act. The content on the site will be created, edited, and discussed by registered users around India, South Asia, and the world. Besides text articles, Sahapedia contains rich media content including photographs, audio-video recordings, maps, timelines, lineage trees, and much more.

Potential Areas of Collaboration between Sahapedia and ICHCAP

- Digitisation programme for making archives and heritage forms available online
- Interview project to record oral history across South Asia

- Maps project to participate in the cultural mapping of India and South Asia by marking cultural forms, practices, and events in their areas
- Heritage education project to provide teachers, students, and parents with a number of ideas and activities
- Policy guideline for intellectual property rights relating to ICH

Discussion

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Asia is the continent where the world's great religions were born and civilisations flourished. The foundations of these religions' teachings are based on pursuing truth and beauty, establishing peace on earth through mutual tolerance, and fostering love as the bedrock of human happiness. The folk traditions of the societies that have developed in the countries of Asia underlie the evolution of the moral and social precepts of these religions as well as draw from their beliefs and practices.

When we talk about South Asia, we see that the world's earliest civilisations developed in this region. For most of the last three millennia, the region has been united under one or two powerful states; each one succeeding the last, and at times, eastern- and western-based polities. The main states in this regard were the Assyrian Empire, the Babylonian Empire, the Achaemenid Empire, the Seleucid Empire, the Parthian Empire, the Roman Empire, the Sassanid Empire, the Byzantine Empire, the Umayyad Caliphate, the Abbasid Caliphate, the Safavid Empire, and the Ottoman Empire.

South Asia is the birthplace of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and other

monotheistic religions. Today, the region is almost 93 percent Muslim and is dominated by Islamic politics. Culturally, the region is Turkish, Arab, and Persian. Iraq is a unique example of Persian, Turkish, and Arab culture. We find deserts in many of the Arab countries with presence of nomadic groups. On the other hand, modern metropolises also exist on the shifting sands: Abu Dhabi, Amman, Riyadh, Doha, and Muscat.

Therefore, Asian societies are by and large pacific in nature. A culture of love and peace governs the life of the common people of Asia, which draws its sustaining energy from the perennial font of its traditional heritage that includes both tangible and intangible culture.

Asian countries have a shared treasure in various disciplines including art, craft, culture, music, and folk traditions. The pervasiveness of folk music in South Asia has long been recognised by scholars who have written about the extraordinary diversity of the subcontinent's music, variegated through regionalism, ethnic multiplicity, and countless foreign influences. Indeed, much of the abundant verbal folklore of the region is performed along the continuum from speech to chant to song, and many everyday activities as well as most special events take place within a musical context. This reflects a widely held belief in music's auspicious properties.

Since I am from a country located in South Asia—Pakistan—I would also like to share my views about the historical and cultural importance of this beautiful country.

Pakistan is a developing country. It is not highly modernised or industrialised. Curiously, underdevelopment has its blessings. One great advantage of being underdeveloped is that Pakistan's folk culture is still a living tradition practiced by a dominant majority of its people. Pakistanis, therefore, do not have to go looking for folklore; it is all over. In fact it is commonplace that an average rural Pakistani may have no awareness whatsoever of his folkloric culture and the richness of his folk heritage, just like fish in water.

Pakistan's traditional culture has evolved over great lengths of time. Though living, it has great antiquity. It links back to the ancient Mehrgarh civilisation that flourished from the Balochistan province of Pakistan more than 9,000 years ago, which is acquainted with the Indus Valley civilisation of Moenjodaro and Harrapa of 5,000 years ago and the Gandhara of 2,500 years ago. Our traditional culture is,

therefore, deeply rooted, and it extends over many centuries.

A large majority Pakistanis lives in the villages. Their life is tradition bound. Customs, rituals, ceremonies, beliefs, folk songs, and dances form the matrix of their day-to-day sentiments.

Pakistan stands out for its dynamic and diverse cultures in terms of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, artistic expressions, creativity, ethnic/religious groups, and languages. With its rich cultural history and commitment to promoting and preserving cultural treasures, Pakistan has also signed the 2003 Convention.

Let me introduce the prime cultural institution in Pakistan to which I belong, Lok Virsa (the National Institute of Folk and Traditional Heritage). It is a pioneering expert national organisation having the requisite expertise and experience of over four decades in collecting, documenting, and preserving tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the country.

It has over twenty thousand hours of professionally recorded authentic cultural materials in its sound archives collected through village-to-village, town-to-town, and district-to-district field surveys and documented scientifically as a storehouse of the nation's heritage for posterity. It is the largest single archive of Pakistan's intangible heritage.

In my considered view, all the relevant cultural organisations in the Asia-Pacific region, in particular in South Asia, should work cohesively under the auspices of UNESCO, ICHCAP, and other bilateral and multilateral cultural organisations for devising a joint strategy to strengthen and safeguard the intangible cultural heritage of the region.

In this regard, I suggest the following.

- Overall, there should be mutual cooperation among the cultural organisations of the Member States of the Asia-Pacific region for entailing occasional visits of experts, folk artists, musicians, and craftspeople. Exhibitions, festivals, conferences, workshops, seminars, and student- and expert-exchange programmes could be the best mechanisms to ensure extensive and intensive cultural exchange.
- Specifically talking about South Asia, which includes nine countries other

than Pakistan, we need to engage with each other more rigorously on multiple levels to exchange expertise and experience, especially on the implications of the 2003 Convention. We have already proposed a regional workshop on mutual learning and sharing for the South Asian states at the occasion of tenth anniversary celebrations of the 2003 Convention.

- If we specifically talk about the implications of 2003 Convention, it includes preparing a comprehensive national inventory of ICH elements and preparing cases of elements for inscription on the Representative and Urgent Safeguarding lists of UNESCO. Certainly it is on these specific points that countries like ours are looking for technical support from Asia-Pacific states that have already achieved landmark achievements in this regard (Korea, China, Japan, Iran, India, and others).

Here, I must offer my appreciation and acknowledge the role and contribution of the Republic of Korea and ICHCAP, Japan and the Asian Cultural Centre for UNESCO, and China for advancing information, knowledge, techniques, and support to other nations about the significance of the intangible cultural heritage in the today's world while devising mechanisms for documenting and preserving traditional culture as a whole. Their initiatives in this direction can certainly serve as a roadmap for other countries of the region to follow in accordance with their own national cultural policies and criteria.

While concluding my paper, I would like to thank ICHCAP and in particular Seong-Yong Park, the Acting Director, and his dedicated team for successfully holding this prestigious event and providing warm hospitality to the participants from other countries at this beautiful city. Here, I also assure our sincere support to ICHCAP in all its efforts and initiatives to promote and strengthen the intangible culture in the Asia-Pacific Region.

Discussion

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However sound and healthy government policies are, with an ever-increasing population and with the invasion of globalisation and the assimilation of cultures and traditions, the promotion and preservation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is a challenging and mammoth task for any government. People's ways of thinking are gradually changing with development. Foreign cultures are seeping into the country and are having a negative impact on the already existing traditions. This is an inevitable problem faced by every developing nation for which a common solution has to be found to slow the effects of outside influences and to safeguard our heritage.

The following are some of the challenges that most countries in Asia, particularly Bhutan, face today.

- Due to rapid socio-economic development in Asia, the communities rich with cultural heritage are increasingly getting exposed to the modern ways and amenities, thereby eroding the existing culture, and their genuine social

practices are constantly threatened with the onset of modern and hybrid cultures through television and other media agents.

- As younger generations of the community population are becoming more oriented towards the modern and western education, core cultural values and heritage are losing their original place of importance and priority in the minds of the youth as younger people are mostly out in schools and colleges, thus losing touch with the community and cultural practices.
- With the changing times and attitudes in society moving towards materialism, people's character and way of thinking are gradually falling to ruin. Bonds between people of different sections of society, involving both thought and action, are at stake.
- With modern education and the rural-urban migration phenomena, the younger segment of the population prefers city life, thus abandoning the older, unproductive citizens to care for themselves. This is leading to the loss of care and concern for the elderly; it has started to undermine the essence, practice, and seriousness of cultural values.
- At the cost of materialistic development, governments and individuals are desecrating and destroying ICH either intentionally or unintentionally. So there is a great threat to some of the important ICH elements being lost forever.

Develop Closer Collaboration among Member Countries

Considering the challenges we face today, we need to work towards building closer co-operation and collaboration among member countries for safeguarding ICH in the region. I hope the following points will serve as a basis for discussion in a small way for drawing resolutions to develop closer collaboration among member countries.

- While extensive studies have been done worldwide in the area of bio-deterioration, not enough studies have been done on mind-degradation of cultural value. The reason being is that in today's world, there is a hue and cry over cultural value, moral value, and the value education for schoolchildren

and older students geared toward making the younger generation better citizens for tomorrow. All parents, policymakers, researchers, and educationists are greatly concerned over this crucial issue. In this regard, the study on “mind-degradation of cultural value and its control” is very important.

- As we move further into our socio-economic development, we need to take a closer look at the challenges facing each other's nation and ways the ICH can be preserved and promoted. We should seriously reconsider how to interpret the values in terms of contemporary needs. The time has come for us to transcend our narrow social views and to look forward to developing an understanding of what has been best described as ‘universal ethics.’ In this way, we will be in a better position to work for the happiness and welfare of nation states.
- Member countries must make efforts to convince the leaders about the importance of safeguarding ICH in their respective countries and the way ICH is effective in projecting national and community identity, and we must make efforts to ensure that our leaders and policymakers come to a common understanding of the value of ICH and then incorporate ICH safeguarding in developmental policies to create a greater social impact.
- People must consciously make the effort to understand the importance of ICH, endeavour to practice their heritage earnestly, and then explain their ICH to others. Our education system and our media network must spread these values through every means possible so that our daily thinking is affected by them. A greater awareness of, and an abiding faith in, the continued relevance of a country's unique ICH needs to be inculcated especially among younger generations. If our culture is to survive and flourish for future generations, our children must understand and accept their role as custodians of a distinct culture and the values and principles on which their country is founded.
- ICH safeguarding involves making individuals understand their responsibility towards society and understand the interrelatedness of the characteristics of different ICH elements. Public opinion should be mobilised to put a halt to the desecration and destruction of ICH and to take action to prevent ICH desecration in respective countries.

- Rich member countries must play a lead role in spearheading ICH safeguarding efforts and must support poor member countries in their safeguarding activities by providing technical support in building human resource capacity. Establishing an ICH safeguarding fund amongst member countries would be beneficial.
- Institutional linkage must be established by exchanging expertise and scholars from member countries from time to time and sharing each other's knowledge and experiences. Periodic intercultural meetings should be convened to promote greater understanding and harmony among member nations.
- A networking and resource centre or a co-ordinating centre for ICH learning must be established for ICH safeguarding activities. This centre must be built with the objective to maintain a database of each other's programmes, to create a computerised database for all ICH and provide accessory facilities, and to foster international study in ICH for a more profound and deeper understanding of ICH, and the centre must issue publications and journals, audio footage, and videos related to issues of interest of the communities of member countries to educate on ICH.

Conclusion

ICH, whether spiritual or temporal, is in danger of dying out because of the rapid change in social situations, and it is an urgent and important problem worldwide to preserve this ICH. We are aware that compared with tangible culture, which is concrete and remains longer, intangible culture heritage is more prone to being lost completely. Bhutan's ICH—the flow of experimental skills of our ancestors and orally transmitted information existing in the minds of rural folk—remains to be dug from the older rural folk who are scattered all over Bhutan. Whatever is accumulated from them should be documented, preserved, and promoted by means of all available equipment.

The Bhutan Department of Culture and ICHCAP are working on proposal for a three-year project to establish and test the technical and conceptual basis of the first National Inventory System of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Bhutan,

following the State Party obligations laid out in the 2003 Convention. This is the noble step towards safeguarding ICH in Bhutan, and we look forward to successfully collaborating.