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Safeguarding intangible heritage of Prayagraj: agenda for policymakers and stakeholders

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Abstract

Since the adoption of the UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in 2003, how to give an impetus to this 'new awareness' regarding identifying and safeguarding ICH has been the favourite talk at various international platforms concerned with heritage conservation. The world has acknowledged the importance of safeguarding ICH, and deliberations have followed on finding universally approved strategies for its identification, preservation and promotion. In India, the situation is as complex and challenging as the societies in it. As a case study, my present paper deals with how intangible heritage is constructed and adds to the identity of a city, which we will attempt to understand with the case study of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Prayagraj, its documentation and agenda for stakeholders.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage, ICH, Documentation, Digital preservation, Documentation Policy, UNESCO, Prayagraj

Introduction

Intangible Cultural Heritage means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.

One of the implications of intangible heritage with a long-lasting tradition is oral history. However, oral history is not to be equated with intangible cultural heritage. While oral history seeks to collect and preserve, as historical records, pieces of information obtained from individuals and/or from groups (Thompson, 1988; Dunaway & Baum, 1996; Perks & Thomson, 1998) [14, 5, 10], ICH attempts to study and preserve cultural heritage in straight connection with the people/community of its origin (Archibald, 2004) [4]; the process involves protecting traditions and shared knowledge, enabling them to be passed to the future generation (UNESCO 2003) [17], not only the archiving and preservation of information.

In any culture or community, especially in the traditional occupations, workplaces have been the centres where the elder people or knowledge holders who have been the primary source of culture and history, teach and transmit their knowledge, skills such as building houses, hunting, medicines, religious practices and so on from one generation to another. It is believed to have sustained many communities until recently.

Prayagraj signifies a plethora of intangible cultural assets, the most outstanding example being the Kumbh (the festival of the sacred pitcher), which was included in the list of UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2017. However, back home, is this recognition alone sufficient, and is it actually making a difference at the ground level; especially to the stakeholders? Until and unless we get an emphatic yes in reply, it means we need to introspect and redesign our policy. We have to look beyond Kumbh as an event, we have to understand the status of some other ICH elements, the communities or the stakeholders associated with it in some or other way; equally important is the unique such as Veni Daan (a ritual performed by Hindu married couples, predominantly from Maharashtra and from other parts. A unique tradition where Veni (braid) is comb & tied and decorated with flowers by husband after few strands of hair is donated to the river, a belief which brings prosperity and peace to the family) and

Kalpavas (Kalpavas which is derived from the concept of 'Kalpa' or a long time. It refers to the practice of spending an entire month on the banks of the Ganga and engaging in daily rituals to attain spiritual peace) and the Kalpavasis (or the practitioners of Kalpavas) near Triveni which are attached with the Kumbh/Magh Mela and Prayagraj in a broader sense that need to be studied.

Scope of ICH Intangible in Prayagraj

Prayagraj has been a culturally rich place, which fulfils the Intangible cultural domains cited in the UNESCO Convention of 2003; besides Kumbh, the other cultural assets are annual Magh Mela, (customs and ceremonies/rituals associated with these popular socio-religious gatherings), the living tradition of Kalpavas and the daily life of Kalpavasis on the bank of Triveni, other rituals like Veni Daan and Pind Daan near Triveni Sangam, traditional wrestling, Gehrebaazi (traditional Horse Cart Race), traditional crafts (Moonj basketry, clay idol making, etc), the local communities (Prayagwals, Goswamis, Ghatiya Pandas, Nishads and Parsis) residing in areas such as at Malviya Ghat, Keed Ganj and Daraganj, and Sangam area, mythology and folklore, and Hindi and Urdu literature, Allahabad ke Sufi Daire and so. Here we have to understand that Intangible heritage cannot be considered as a separate entity from tangible forms of culture rather they complement each other in the form of myth and legends, and in the skills of its practitioners who are one of the stakeholders in conserving ICH. Also, the above-mentioned intangible heritage assets construct and add on to the identity of Prayagraj making it unique and distinguishable from other places.

'Inclusive' Documentation of ICH & Sustainability

The intangible heritage is in a process of continuous change, some of it is lost along the way, or is under grave threat. It must be recorded before it is lost forever. For example, The Prayagwal, also known as Pragwal, are the Brahmin priests who provide religious services to the pilgrims visiting Prayagraj; their primary function is to guide the pilgrims through the rituals associated with a visit to the city. Historically, during the medieval period, the Prayagwal established their exclusive rights to serve pilgrims at the Triveni Sangam as a result of a Farman (decree) issued by Akbar in 1593. The Bahi or the genealogy record-keeping practices or the traditional flags & cots of Prayagwals have seen drastic changes due to the lack of interest within the community and other socio-economic reasons. The other challenges for them have been 'Poaching Patrons' where data or information from the Bahis has been poached on the pretext of something else from the priests. Poaching of their data, which they have preserved with so much hardship. During documentation, I met pandas who claimed to have even the manuscripts of Farman or decree from Akbar and genealogy of Shivaji Maharaj. There have been challenges one of them reluctance towards the digitisation or because Digitisation can't retain the 'emotional connect' towards looking at the handwriting of one's ancestors and the humane relationship between Panda and Yajaman which can't be replaced by technology. The policymakers, in this regard, ace organisations such as the National Mission for Manuscripts, Delhi & Ministry of Culture can come out with policies balancing the equation and way forward with the inclusive approach as mentioned above.

Then we have the Nishad or the boatmen community whose boat-making skills and knowledge about flora and fauna (such as the identification of medicinal plants, turtles, dolphins, etc.) in river Ganga have been transferred orally from one generation to the next. But, over time, the upcoming generation of the community is not that keen on imbibing this knowledge primarily due to the unavailability of information about their past and the scope of its usage. Hence, the efforts of documentation should not be exclusive in nature or a largely second party affair, rather it should imply inclusive documentation or self-documentation efforts from within the community that will help in encouraging the continued practice.

An example of sustainability of inclusive documentation could be Raghurajpur (Bhubaneswar, Odisha), the first heritage village of India known for its world-famous Pattachitra art. In 2000, after a two-year research and documentation project by INTACH, the village was developed as the state's first heritage village and INTACH developed a crafts library, an interpretation centre, an amphitheatre and guest houses here. However, just like other projects this too had its shortcomings and limitations due to the scope of the project. As a result, a sense of dissatisfaction among a few of the local community members has emerged. During my visit to the place in 2016, some of them came up with their grievances - about their livelihoods suffering due to commercialisation by businessmen and inhabitants of neighbouring villages misguiding the tourists by selling Pattachitras made using block printing techniques.

Similarly, for any project based on the above theme in the context of Prayagraj must have deliberation between the stakeholders (practitioners/community, school/college/NGO) and Policymakers addressing the issues and challenges before a project is undertaken.

De-Colonisation of policies & tools

The De-Colonisation of policies should be one of the steps in the approach towards the safeguarding of ICH in the context of India. International recognition and induction in coveted lists of UNESCO and likes should not be the final goal. We must remember that UNESCO's list is highly specific concerning a particular localised context and cannot be generalised to other situations. This becomes truer especially in the context of a culturally diverse, vibrant and complex country like India. It shouldn't be mistaken for complete isolation from the international norms but measures that are in sync with them and yet are local.

The policymakers must come out and de-colonise their policies and tools and draft it on a case by case basis with the development of a tool that addresses the majority of issues if not all in consultation with anthropologists, academicians, historians, intellectuals, archaeologists, Cultural Resource Persons (CRPs)/Practitioners/Knowledge holders along with the creation of a customised and dedicated ICH template and Research-cum-interpretation centres. In the present times, various agencies and individuals are working in the field of intangible culture and its documentation, however, their varied Modus-operandi and efforts have not led to any logical conclusion, so far.

Dissemination and Follow-ups

During my field investigations and documentation at various places, I have come across another major limitation that has

hindered the dissemination of ICH, so far. It is the laid-back attitude of policymakers towards the practitioners or participating community. Any research work, documentation should not just be in the confines of a library or an archive but should be disseminated to the participating community. Ensuring the widest possible participation of communities, groups and individuals, allows ICH to be safeguarded and promoted creatively by the creators, inheritors and practitioners of such heritage. Platforms in the form of school curriculums/vocational courses, conducting workshops, seminars, Lec-dem, folk festivals at local, regional or national levels in schools and colleges by including stakeholders (knowledge-bearers and practitioners) helps practitioners to identify and develop successors and future torchbearers. After all, the intended goal is safeguarding ICH in a democratic form in other words by the people, to the people and for the people.

Conclusion

We must remember that preservation of heritage requires sustained and repeated enhancement of that practice as part of how it is preserved over time. Documentary practices, while they may contribute to the preservation, are not themselves preservation. Any documentation activity or project should not be our final goal rather we should strive for sustainability. Ideally, the preservation of intangible heritage requires establishing appropriate conditions under which cultural knowledge and the embodied practices manifesting that knowledge continues sustainably.

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