



Community Participation in Identifying, Inventorying, Managing, and Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in Nepal

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Abstract

Intangible Cultural Heritage Safeguarding and Community Participation is one of the topics discussed within UNESCO's Asia-Pacific Higher Education Network for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage (APHEN-ICH). Specifically, this article focuses on Nepal as a case due to its rich cultural and religious characteristics. The main emphasis of the article, however, lies in evaluating the efforts made by the Nepalese people in protecting their unique national assets. Furthermore, the article explores the relationship between Nepal's intangible cultural heritages and the local population. It examines how the local population contributes to the preservation of these national treasures and analyzes the resulting impacts, causes, and other relevant factors. Additionally, the article delves into the various opportunities, challenges, and potential solutions associated with safeguarding intangible cultural heritages and engaging the community in this process.

Keywords: community participation, intangible cultural heritage, safeguarding, Nepal.

1. Introduction

The global context of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is primarily defined by the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, adopted in 2003. This convention aims to recognize and promote the significance of intangible cultural heritage, including practices, knowledge, skills, and cultural spaces that communities and groups consider part of their heritage (UNESCO, 2022). As a signatory to the Convention, Nepal plays a crucial role in safeguarding its intangible cultural heritage. The country has a rich cultural legacy, including folk music, dance, festivals, rituals, craftsmanship, and oral traditions. These elements are deeply ingrained in Nepalese communities and contribute to their identity and sense of belonging.

With its 125 documented ethnic groups, Nepal is one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world. It is also multicultural, multilingual, and diverse, with 125 spoken languages (Sah, 2021). Preserving and promoting its cultural heritage is a source of pride for

Nepal, as it is an integral part of its identity. Nepal's involvement in the Convention includes identifying, documenting, and promoting its intangible cultural heritage. This involves initiatives such as inventorying cultural practices, raising awareness among communities, supporting traditional knowledge practitioners, and integrating intangible cultural heritage into education and sustainable development programs.

Through its participation in international forums and collaborations facilitated by the Convention, Nepal exchanges experiences, best practices, and expertise in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. By actively engaging with the Convention, Nepal contributes to global efforts to preserve and promote the diversity of intangible cultural expressions, fostering mutual respect and understanding among cultures worldwide.

Over the years, the definition of intangible cultural heritage has evolved. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines it as the cultural heritage that has been passed down from generation to generation, encompassing not only physical aspects but also intangible expressions like social practices, performing arts, oral traditions, festive events, and spiritual ceremonies (UNESCO, 2023). These cultural heritages not only preserve traditional ways of life but also provide a platform for younger generations to connect with their culture, learn about their identities, incorporate them into their daily lives, and respect the ways of life of others (UNESCO, 2007). The concept of "intangible" cultural heritage aims to instill a sense of identity among people and help them appreciate possessions connected to their culture and religion, even if they are not tangible.

Nepal's intangible cultural heritages permeate every aspect of daily life, from the bustling streets of Kathmandu to the hidden villages in the mountains, from the flat Terai region to the towering Himalayas, and from one ethnic group to another. These heritages form a dynamic mosaic that reflects the country's cultural wealth and character. The pulsating heartbeat of the nation is made up of diverse rituals, festivals, historical occasions, myths, acts of devotion, and natural cycles. Each of these remarkable events is marked by intricate yet enjoyable rituals, vibrant music, folk and traditional dances, and stunning traditional attire (Baral, 2019). Intangible cultural heritage in Nepal serves as a bridge between the past, present, and future, playing a crucial role in defining the nation's identity. Despite being a small, developing nation in South Asia, Nepal's cultural treasures and the need for global cultural awareness are still not fully recognized. Therefore, this article aims to provide a comprehensive overview of Nepal's intangible cultural heritage, including its significance, challenges, and potential.

The goal of this article is to educate readers about Nepal's diverse intangible cultural heritage and help them understand its importance within the country. By delving into the country's culture, especially its intangible cultural heritage, this article aims to raise awareness of Nepal's rich traditions and assets. Additionally, this article aims to explore the potential and challenges associated with these cultural resources and examine the connections between civilization and intangible cultural heritage. Finally, this article will focus on possible strategies and solutions to safeguard and promote the nation's cultural legacies.

2. The intangible cultural heritage of Nepal

As mentioned above, Nepal is rich when it comes to cultural heritage. In this section, we embark on the intangible cultural heritages that embellish the cultural structure of Nepal. This section focuses on exploring the main domains of intangible cultural heritage found in Nepal and unveiling what each domain has to offer.

2.1 Oral rituals

The oral rituals (Maukhik Parampara in Nepali) of storytelling and folklore have been used by Nepali for millennia to pass down their traditions from one generation to the next. Not only have stories about civilizations and customs been passed down through the generations, but also numerous made-up tales, bedtime stories, and other stories have been ingrained in Nepali society. These are the historical customs that are still very much in use today and play a crucial role in fostering cross-generational communication and cultural exchange. These oral ceremonies discuss many gods and goddesses, well-known heroes, and various significant elements of society. These oral traditions had their origins in literature or other written forms before evolving into oral tales and interactions that allowed for a deeper understanding of the social and linguistic facets of society (Universität Wien, 2021). Some of the famous folklore in Nepal includes Yetis (creatures in the snow), Kichkandi (witches), Pishacha (forms of Vampires), Jhakri (a breed of shamans in the form of doctors), Bhakunde Bhoot (wandering spirits, ghosts), and many more (Bista, 2015).

2.2 Performing arts

Nepali are passionate about the arts since the nation is among the most stunning and creative in the entire globe. Dance, music, illusion, theater, and mime have traditionally been the most well-liked performing arts in Nepal and have played a significant role in preserving the nation's current variety. The concept of performance arts in Nepal dates back to when there was a panchayat system (no-party system) in Nepal during the mid-1980s (Baral, 2019; Performance Art Resources, 2020). The performing arts in Nepal have not only been used in the context of culture and traditions but also have played an important role in political and social aspects of the country as people find it effective to send a message to society through the means of performing arts. These forms of Nepal's intangible cultural heritage have been appropriated by several artists throughout the globe, helping to keep the country's reputation intact. Since performing arts have traditionally played a significant role in defining the Nepali identity, the curriculum of educational institutions now includes a variety of performing arts, including dances, musical instruments, and theatrical productions, to infuse culture into the learning process (Joshi & Dangal, 2020).

2.3 Traditional crafts

Nepali people cherish hand-made crafts and other items of this nature since they have a long history of practicing traditional craftsmanship. The majority of Nepalese handicrafts are influenced by the Hindu and Buddhist religions, and people often employ locally accessible raw materials such as bamboo, tree trunks, leaves, etc. God statues, silver and metallic goods, pottery, stone sculptures, handcrafted papers, bells, and a wide variety of other objects are only a few examples. These handcrafted items are not only a part of Nepali culture, but they also make wonderful gifts and keepsakes for loved ones. The tradition of making handicrafts dates way back in the Nepali culture, and the most common types of them are woodcrafts, metalcrafts, silver craft, metalcraft, bamboo craft, and ceramics (Kailash Himalaya Trek, 2021). This type of intangible cultural legacy is crucial for exhibiting talent and simultaneously maintaining the culture.

2.4 Social practices

Given that more than 60% of Nepalis identify as Hindu, social practices like festivals and rituals play a significant role in Nepali culture. Hinduism is recognized as the religion that celebrates the greatest number of social activities. The majority of Nepal's social customs are based on folklore, the blessings of the old, or the commemoration of a significant historical event. In addition to festivals and festivities, Nepal also observes religious rituals such as pujas (God

worship), temple visits, and rites to honor plants, the sun, and nature. As all ethnic groups share the same social practices of religion, tolerance, and friendship, Nepali social practices unite the communities, foster social peace, and enable diverse ethnic groups to coexist.

3. Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe

The cultural heritage surrounding knowledge and practices related to nature and the universe is deeply rooted in Nepal. The country's diverse landscape, which ranges from the towering peaks of the Himalayas to lush valleys and plains, has forged a unique bond between its people and the natural world. According to UNESCO (2007), traditional beliefs, such as animism and Hinduism, play a significant role in shaping our cultural heritage. Numerous rituals, ceremonies, and festivals are dedicated to honoring and appeasing various natural elements, deities, and celestial bodies. Moreover, practices like astrology, Ayurveda, Yoga, and Vastu Shastra are intricately woven into our culture, reflecting our deep connection with nature.

Nepal's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) regarding nature and the universe extends beyond religious or spiritual beliefs; it also encompasses traditional ecological knowledge passed down through generations. UNIECO Domains also highlights the knowledge includes sustainable agricultural practices, herbal medicine, and conservation techniques that exhibit a profound respect for the environment (UNESCO, 2023). Preserving and promoting this cultural heritage is crucial for Nepal's sustainable development.

3.1 *Preserving cultural treasures through education and awareness*

Nestled in the heart of the Himalayas, Nepal is a country renowned for its breathtaking landscapes, rich history, and vibrant cultural heritage. Beyond the majestic mountains and ancient temples, Nepal is home to a diverse range of intangible heritage that reflects the country's identity and traditions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MOFA], 2023). From vibrant festivals to unique art forms, these intangible treasures are invaluable and must be cherished and preserved for future generations.

According to UNESCO (2007), Intangible heritage encompasses the non-physical aspects of a culture, including traditions, rituals, oral histories, performing arts, and social practices. Nepal, with its diverse ethnic communities and indigenous groups, boasts a plethora of intangible heritage that has been passed down through generations. One of the most prominent aspects of Nepal's intangible heritage is its religious and cultural festivals. Dashain, the biggest Hindu festival, is a vibrant celebration of the victory of good over evil. The festival stretches over 15 days and is marked by various rituals, including animal sacrifices, cultural dances, and the flying of colorful kites (Nepal Tourism Board, 2023). Tihar, also known as the Festival of Lights, is another significant festival where Nepalis honor animals, including cows, dogs, and crows, as a symbol of respect and gratitude.

Traditional music and dance forms are integral to Nepal's intangible heritage. The country is known for its diverse folk dances, such as the Dhime dance, Maruni dance, and Maithili dance, each originating from different regions and ethnic groups (Baral, 2019). These dance forms often depict stories from mythology and local folklore, accompanied by traditional musical instruments like the Madal, Sarangi, and Bansuri.

Nepal's oral traditions and storytelling practices are deeply rooted in its intangible heritage. Tales of gods, goddesses, and legendary figures have been passed down through generations via oral narratives. The ancient epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata hold a special place in the hearts of Nepalis, and storytellers continue (UNESCO, 1967) to captivate audiences with their vivid retelling of these timeless tales.

Another remarkable aspect of Nepal's intangible heritage is its traditional craftsmanship. Skilled artisans create intricate wood carvings, metalwork, pottery, and textile designs that reflect the country's rich artistic traditions. The Newari community, renowned for its exquisite architecture and craftsmanship, has played a significant role in preserving Nepal's traditional art forms.

Khanal (2019) focuses on language as a vital part of a country's intangible heritage, and Nepal boasts remarkable linguistic diversity. With over 120 languages spoken across the nation, Nepal is a linguistic treasure trove. From Nepali, the official language, to regional languages like Newari, Maithili, and Tamang, each language carries its own unique cultural nuances and contributes to the country's rich tapestry of intangible heritage.

While Nepal takes pride in its intangible heritage, it also faces challenges in preserving and safeguarding these cultural treasures. Rapid urbanization, globalization, and changing lifestyles pose threats to the sustainability of traditional practices and knowledge. Additionally, the recent devastating earthquakes in 2015 further highlighted the need for concerted efforts to safeguard Nepal's cultural heritage. To address these challenges, Nepal has taken important steps to safeguard its intangible heritage. The government, in collaboration with UNESCO, has identified and documented various elements of intangible heritage, providing a foundation for preservation efforts. Additionally, local communities, cultural organizations, and NGOs have played a crucial role in raising awareness, conducting research, and implementing initiatives to safeguard intangible heritage.

Education and awareness programs are vital in ensuring the continuity of Nepal's intangible heritage. Schools and community centers can incorporate traditional art forms, storytelling, and festivals into their curricula to foster a sense of pride and appreciation for cultural traditions among the younger generation (Dangal et al., 2021). This helps to create a deeper connection with their heritage and encourages them.

4. Major aspects of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in Nepal

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in Nepal encompasses traditions, customs, and practices passed down through generations. The key aspects of ICH focus on Traditional Arts and Crafts. According to the UNESCO (2007) Nepal has a vibrant array of traditional art forms, including Thangka painting, woodcarving, and pottery, each with unique techniques and cultural significance. Music and Dance are integral to Nepal's cultural identity. From classical melodies like Dohori to folk dances like Dhime Baja, these expressions reflect the diverse ethnic groups and their histories.

Nepal celebrates numerous festivals throughout the year, deeply rooted in religious or cultural traditions. Festivals like Dashain, Tihar, and Teej are observed with great fervor and play a significant role in community cohesion. Nepal is home to a multitude of languages and dialects, each with rich oral traditions of storytelling, folklore, and epic narratives like the Mahabharata and Ramayana, which have been passed down orally for centuries (UNESCO, 2007). Nepali cuisine reflects the diverse geography and cultural influences.

Traditional dishes like momo, dal bhat, and Newari cuisine are not only a source of sustenance but also a symbol of social bonding and identity. Traditional healing systems such as Ayurveda and Jhakri practices have been preserved in Nepal for centuries, offering holistic approaches to health and well-being. Preserving and promoting these aspects of Intangible Cultural Heritage is crucial for maintaining Nepal's cultural identity and fostering pride among its people, while also offering insights into the country's rich heritage for future generations.

5. Importance of Intangible Cultural Heritages

The Intangible Cultural Heritages are not only pretty to the eye but also hold many benefits and significance in the world as well as in the context of Nepal.

Importance Globally. Only through diversity and distinctions is the peaceful cohabitation of people possible across the world. According to MOFA (2023), it incorporates not just a community's religious features but also ideas about the environment, globalization, and modern society. These kinds of cultural heritages are crucial for any community, regardless of size or scale, as they foster social cohesion, instill an appreciation for variety and culture throughout the world, and serve as a blueprint for establishing an inclusive society (UNESCO, 2023).

Importance in the context of Nepal. Similar to what was stated above, the significance of Nepal's intangible cultural heritages will be discussed here:

1. An integral component of Nepali identity is its intangible cultural heritage. In order to leave a mark on the world, it aids in the development and preservation of Nepal's varied communities' and cultures' identities.
2. People in Nepal feel a feeling of belonging and the community becomes more inclusive when these kinds of heritages are present.
3. Even though Nepal is a very varied nation, its intangible cultural heritages aid in bringing together members of various cultures, foster greater social cohesiveness and promote peaceful coexistence.
4. Cultural and customary practices that have been passed down from generation to generation can be preserved, protected, and promoted with the aid of intangible cultural heritages, preventing their extinction.
5. Not only do these kinds of cultural heritages contribute to the country's cultural elements, but they also encourage travel, deepen relations between Nepal and other nations, improve the economy of the nation, and strengthen Nepal's worldwide standing.
6. The intangible cultural heritages also help in reducing the generation gap and increase the connectivity between the older generation and the younger generation.
7. They can be applied in various educational field and make culture a part of the education system of the country (Joshi & Dangal, 2020), which further provides awareness and encourage people to protect and promote them in a more effective manner.

6. Risk factor of intangible cultural heritage in Nepali context

Preserving Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in Nepal faces several risk factors that threaten its continuation and vitality. These risk factors include modernization and globalization, natural disasters, social and political instability, commercialization and tourism, decline of traditional knowledge, and lack of awareness and institutional support.

Modernization and globalization have eroded traditional practices and values in Nepal due to rapid urbanization and increased exposure to global influences. This has resulted in younger generations neglecting or abandoning traditional cultural practices in favor of modern lifestyles.

Nepal is prone to natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, and landslides, which can cause significant damage to cultural sites, artifacts, and oral traditions (Shrestha et al., 2024). The physical destruction caused by these disasters also disrupts the social fabric that sustains cultural practices.

Periods of political unrest and conflict can disrupt cultural activities and erode social cohesion, leading to the restriction or suppression of cultural events and practices (Shrestha et al., 2024). This ultimately results in a loss of cultural identity and heritage.

While tourism can bring economic opportunities, it also poses risks to ICH. Commercialization and mass tourism can lead to the commodification of cultural practices, distortion of traditions for tourist appeal, and exploitation of cultural resources without proper respect for their significance. The migration of younger generations to urban areas in search of education (Rai & Dangal, 2022) and employment opportunities poses a risk to traditional knowledge and skills. The transmission of oral traditions, craftsmanship, and indigenous knowledge systems may be disrupted, resulting in a decline in ICH.

Limited awareness about the importance of ICH among policymakers, communities, and the general public hinders efforts to safeguard and promote cultural heritage. Insufficient institutional support, funding, and resources further exacerbate the risk factors.

Addressing these risk factors requires a concerted effort from government agencies, cultural institutions, communities, and other stakeholders. Strategies may include raising awareness about the value of ICH, integrating cultural education into formal and informal curricula, implementing policies to protect cultural rights, promoting sustainable tourism practices, and fostering community-led initiatives for cultural preservation and revitalization.

7. Opportunities and challenges of the Intangible Cultural Heritages of Nepal

Particularly in emerging nations like Nepal, the intangible cultural heritage brings with it a variety of opportunities. As a result, both the individuals who live there and the nation as a whole may benefit from these assets. The opportunities that there are types of heritages bring to Nepal are explained in this section. To begin with, Nepal is a tourism destination in and of itself, attracting thousands of visitors each year owing to its natural and cultural riches. Intangible Cultural Heritage gives Nepal a platform to market itself throughout the world and highlight what this country has to offer. Incoming visitors may be highly advantageous to a developing country like Nepal since it helps to strengthen international ties and diplomacy, and it also receives money from tourists every year. It not only helps Nepal get international recognition, but it also helps to increase the country's economic growth, which will eventually improve the living conditions of the people who live there.

Similarly, to that, various kinds of traditions, notably performing arts and handicrafts, provide a route for individuals to participate in creative enterprises. People are given possibilities for employment and are empowered by it. People can engage in a number of vocations, such as teaching various performing arts, such as dancing, musical instruments, mimicry, theater performances, and more.

Additionally, developing one's own company, learning new skills, and growing are all things that may be accomplished by producing various handicrafts. Additionally, they might establish a number of training facilities to advance people's knowledge and offer vocational training to those in need, particularly women, to boost community empowerment. It not only generates chances in the cultural realm but also opens doors of opportunity in the economic realm. It encourages individuals to be committed, explore their culture and religion, and rely on these national resources for spiritual support in order to advance personally. It aids in fostering communal cultural interchange, which opens up other options. By applying their skills to the education sector, people may also promote their knowledge of these sorts of sectors related to education and contribute to raising the literacy rate. Even though it is not a very developed or economically wealthy country, Nepal would begin to grow if these kinds of prospects were

investigated more and taken advantage of. This would help the people's quality of life and lead the nation in a better direction.

Culture and cultural heritages are gradually disappearing as a result of increased industrialization and globalization. People frequently place such a high value on purported "development" that they neglect to consider the modest beginnings of growth. People have turned away from their identity and culture in order to live a Western and contemporary lifestyle, and as a result, particularly the intangible cultural legacy is disappearing. In addition, individuals often want to reside in more urbanized and industrialized nations and cities, which forces them to abandon their own cultures and customs. People frequently forget about their heritages as a result of growing urbanization and the demand for a lavish living. Not just the younger generations, but also the elder generations set the stage for this phenomenon by leaving their culture behind, causing their children to grow up with no concept of cultural heritages or living heritages, ultimately discouraging the usage and popularity of such sorts of heritages.

Lack of knowledge and education is another major obstacle to the development of Nepal's intangible cultural heritage. People unwittingly tend to drive such cultural elements of the nation extinct when there is a lack of understanding of their significance. Furthermore, the cultural heritages of Nepal are not given due respect, which makes it challenging for the Nepali people to work to preserve these national treasures. It is also challenging for people to continue conserving the intangible cultural heritage to the point where their own lives may be at risk since Nepal is a geographically challenging nation where natural catastrophes and tragedies occur frequently.

8. Conclusion

The conservation and promotion of Nepal's intangible cultural assets have become more challenging due to the aforementioned issues and difficulties. Nevertheless, there are several solutions to these problems, which will be covered in this section. First and foremost, people need to be made aware of the value that their country's intangible cultural heritage has for their lives, identities, and nation. People will not be motivated to take action to conserve and promote these assets of their nation unless they are fully informed about them. It must be made clear that in addition to forms of development like urbanization and modernization, they also need cultural development for the objectives of personal development. They must also be informed of the numerous opportunities that these types of assets present in a person's life. Skills from one person to another, and one generation to another, must be passed on so that these cultural heritages never disappear from the country.

The commercial and tourist implications of intangible cultural heritages must also be discussed. If this happens, people will be more motivated to learn and teach diverse culturally linked skills. These areas require international collaboration and support since they are not just about the past but also a vital resource for the present and the future and have a lot to offer. The pursuit of knowledge about this intangible cultural legacy might open up new prospects and allow for its application to a number of different disciplines of study. Finding a future for Nepal's intangible legacy is crucial, especially in light of its history, variety, and cultural uniqueness. This promotes personal growth for each individual in addition to aiding in their development.

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