

Investing in People to Safeguard ICH

Ananya Bhattacharya

Director

Banglanatak, India

Abstract

Countries in the Asia-Pacific region abound in a wealth of cultural expressions, but these expressions are not often recognized as skills that may be used to revitalize communities. ICH safeguarding needs to look beyond research and documentation, building databases on art forms, and creating awareness through one-off festivals or made-up landscapes where the artists and crafts persons are uprooted from their natural environment to engage in demonstration. The paper shares examples from an initiative in India that emphasizes the need for investing in communities to revitalize their traditional skills and promote community-based creative enterprises, including cultural tourism to safeguard ICH. The Art for Life (AFL) initiative of banglanatak dot com, a social enterprise headquartered at Kolkata, India, aims at fostering an alternative pathway for development using cultural heritage as concrete means for improving people's livelihoods and empowering local communities. Around twelve languishing folk art forms have been revitalized. The initiative has led to improved income and quality of life for 5,000 traditional artists. Non-monetized outcomes include improved

education of children, improved health, and better access to sanitation. Capacity building of the ICH practitioners, documentation, and dissemination, heritage education and awareness building, and promotion of grassroots creative enterprise have been the critical components of the safeguarding process.

The Story of a Village of Painters

Naya is a small village around 130 km away from the city of Kolkata in eastern India. All the sixty-five families living in the village have the surname Chitrakar, meaning painter. They are a unique tribe of folk painters called Patuas who are painters and lyricists as well as singers. For centuries, they have painted mythological tales on long scrolls and sang them as they went from house to house. The art form is called Patachitra or scroll painting of Bengal. In the early years of this century, less than a score of Patuas were pursuing the tradition. Even fewer knew the songs. Most villagers earned a living by working as daily laborers or vendors. The unique art form found appreciation in academic journals and documentary films but there was little impact on the life of the Patuas. Today's Naya is in sharp contradiction to its situation a decade back. It is a vibrant cultural hub. There are more than four hundred Patuas painting scrolls on themes ranging from mythology to biographies, contemporary events, and communiqués on social issues. Every weekend, and often on weekdays, there are visitors, Indian and international, to the village. They listen to the songs and learn about the painted stories and about making color from fruits, flowers, and seeds. The Patuas are commissioned to paint about social issues, to enliven new airports and underground railway stations, and to illustrate comic books. The veteran painters—the Gurus—guide the enthusiastic younger generation in regular training sessions at the village resource center. Women and girls have especially come forward to make the art form their livelihood. They have overcome social sanctions on mobility and pressure of child marriage, and they are travelling across the globe to share their powerful story. The average monthly income has increased from USD 10 in 2005 to USD 250 in 2013. The Patuas now live in brick houses, have electricity and toilet at home, and send their children to school.

Safeguarding Patachitra was possible owing to targeted investment in revitalizing

the traditional skills of the Patuas. The interventions were part of the Art for Life (AFL) initiative of *banglanatak dot com*, a social enterprise working across India for fostering equitable development using culture-based approaches. Initiated in 2005, the program has so far covered around 5,000 folk dancers, folk singers and musicians, folk drama troupes, and folk painters in the states of Bihar and West Bengal in eastern India. AFL aims at fostering an alternative pathway for development, using cultural heritage as concrete means for improving people's livelihoods and empowering local communities. At Naya, the senior painters taught painting and singing in training programs held in the village. Contemporary painters, designers, and new media artists from India and abroad worked with the Patuas to explore new ways and mediums of expression. Patuas learned the use of varied colors and started painting on silk, leather, glass, and metal, thus creating a wide range of products. The lost tradition of using natural colors was revived. The artists formed a collective called *Chitrataru* to manage their art. A resource center was established in the village. For the past three years, an annual village festival, *POT Maya*, has been held in the last week end of November to promote awareness and Naya as a cultural tourism destination. With Naya emerging as a cultural hub, capacity building has not remained limited to transmission and revitalization of skills, but has also addressed building understanding on the advantages as well as potential pitfalls of tourism development and training on hygiene. Funding support in the initial years came from the government of India's rural self-employment program (2005–2008) and then from the European Union (2009–2011). Currently the Department of Tourism of the state government of West Bengal is working with the Patuas to plan investments of USD 100,000 for strengthening the infrastructure. Naya has found a place in the state tourism brochures, and it is a case study in UNWTO's recent 'Study Report on Tourism and Intangible Cultural Heritage'.

Cultural Capital of Communities

Countries in the Asia-Pacific region abound in a wealth of cultural expressions, but these expressions are not often recognized as skills that may be used to revitalize the communities. Popular models of safeguarding heritage remain limited to academic research, documentation—building databases on art forms and in few cases on artists—and awareness-raising activities through one-off festivals or made-up landscapes in

urban areas or suburbs where the artists and craftspeople are uprooted from their natural environment to engage in demonstrations. Mechanisms of community participation are tokenistic or ad hoc. Culture remains a subject to be studied and admired and not a waterhole for local development. It is commonly said that culture gets low priority among investors, government or private, and hence remains neglected. To address this, it is important to build understanding on how safeguarding intangible cultural heritage may essentially become a tool for building an ecosystem for equitable and sustainable development of communities. The story of Naya illustrates how investment in culture can drive community development and well-being through building enterprises and strengthening cultural identity and pride. It illustrates, as mentioned in Article 13 of the 2003 Convention, the importance of 'promoting the function of the intangible cultural heritage in society, and at integrating the safeguarding of such heritage into planning program'. The following sections share the learning from AFL initiative on critical tasks for safeguarding ICH.

Safeguarding Tasks

Building and maintaining an **inventory of ICH practitioners** is a crucial step. The lack of comprehensive information on the geographical spread of folk artists, their number, and their level of skills constrains evolving realistic planning of interventions. This information is also essential for planning promotional activities and building community-based institutions. A strategy of facilitating participation of the community in building the inventory helps in identifying the leaders from the community and also builds their sense of ownership on the safeguarding process from the outset.

Core task for safeguarding is **developing and implementing comprehensive training and capacity building programs for strengthening the transmission of skills as well as building capacities for contemporary applications of ICH elements**. The curriculum for training has to evolve from the Gurus of the art form and not imposed. Multiregional and multicultural exchange and collaboration are important to build the capacity of traditional practitioners for innovative ways to reach out to contemporary markets and audiences. Questions are often raised about the risk of losing authenticity while catering to market demands. Facilitating collaborative workshops for the practitioners of folk art and contemporary art and theatre directors,

musicians, composers, new media artists, and designers leads to improved confidence among the traditional ICH practitioners. They are better able to understand their own cultural context and to further innovate. Training has to address building new technical skills like the nuances of stage performances and in-studio environments in the case of performing arts.

The participation of ICH practitioners in international networks is also important for success. Bauls and Fakirs are the Sufi singers of Bengal. Their philosophy of attaining the divine through universal love and brotherhood emerged in the seventeenth century, unshackling the sanctions posed by a society stifled with superstitions, caste divisions, religious intolerance, and malpractices. Festivals were used to promote their music and put them on the global Sufi map. Sufi Sutra, an international peace music festival held at Kolkata, has seen the participation of nineteen international and nine national teams over the past three years. The festival has connected the Bauls and Fakirs to a global audience. The wandering minstrels who hardly earned from their performance in 2005 now earn around USD 100 per month.

Promoting enterprise building and entrepreneurship for developing a heritage-based creative sector is an effective strategy for safeguarding ICH in today's world. This offers the opportunity for building on the traditional skill base and augmenting local employment opportunities. The creative sector is economically important from the point of low capital investment, a high ratio of value addition, and a high potential for export/foreign exchange earnings through the sale of cultural products and the promotion of cultural tourism. Under AFL, artists' collectives were trained in financial literacy, pricing of cultural products, and even language training so that they could deal directly with market. The women at Naya, for example, learned to speak English so that they could explain their stories to visitors who did not know the local language (Bengali). Chau dancers, accustomed to nightlong performance of acrobatic masked dances, learned to make short productions (15 to 40 minutes long) and increased their repertoire by developing productions based on stories by Tagore and Shakespeare. Today, they perform across India and have travelled to the UK and Japan.

In India, traditional ICH bearers are mostly from deprived communities. They needed **support for costumes, musical instruments, and accessories**. They voiced the need for places for practicing and showcasing, and resource centers were established in the villages with large number of ICH practitioners. These centers have

now become the cornerstone for developing the area as a hub of creative industry based on ICH. **The model of developing artist villages as cultural hubs** is inherently more sustainable than artificial heritage parks or made-up villages in city neighborhoods.

The importance of **documenting** oral traditions and cultural expressions is well recognized and practiced. Unfortunately, it often remains as mere output rather than a resource or means for education, awareness raising, and capacity building. Research on ICH must not remain as something studied and admired by a selected few, but rather be used to inform and influence policy and practice for safeguarding culture. **Modern technologies offer much opportunity for connecting communities** and augmenting income of even isolated communities, but effective dissemination remains a challenge. Safeguarding thus needs to address **creating and strengthening cultural production and distribution capacities**.

Awareness raising and information programs need to target **wider access to global markets** and international distribution networks for cultural activities, goods, and services. The emergence of **viable local and regional markets** for promoting and circulating cultural goods and services needs to be supported by the government. Linking and networking private and public stakeholders in learning, producing, and disseminating culture-based products are also important for sharing knowledge, good practices, and replication efforts.

Festivals regularly organized and with a fixed schedule have emerged as a powerful tool for promotion and for creating new audiences. Festivals are not just about stage performances. Successful festivals facilitate interaction with musicians, art lovers, art critics, researchers, and academics and thereby open up new avenues and give practitioners new ideas. As described in the introductory case study of Naya, village festivals like POT Maya encourage visitors to see traditional culture. They also help to extend the benefit of culture-based development to the larger village community. This helps address migration from rural to urban areas.

Drivers for Culture-Based Development

Besides reduction of poverty (MDG 1) and socio-economic empowerment of women (MDG 3), a key outcome of AFL has been the fostering of social inclusion. Commercial success and new livelihood opportunities motivated the youth to learn

traditions. The safeguarding process under AFL renewed community pride and strengthened their identity. Most ICH bearers are marginalized and deprived, devoid of social recognition and respect. Conventional pathways of development do not recognize traditional skills. A Baul singer may be illiterate but knows hundreds of songs. The nomadic and indigenous artisan making intricate Dokra craft using primitive lost wax methods of molding metal has rich knowledge of nature and natural elements. The ingenuity of Patua, who may not be able to write but can create a song and framed animation of any story in a long scroll, demands appreciation. In the absence of social recognition, communities often give up their traditions in search for better income and social status. Strategies for revitalizing heritage need to address reinstilling their lost pride. This way the marginalized communities feel included in the development process when they gradually witness their own transformation from art laborers to art entrepreneurs. Safeguarding these intangible heritage elements as a means of livelihood has proven to be driver of local development. Key drivers are recognizing skills as asset for development and social recognition for ICH practitioners, investing in their development by transmitting and rejuvenating their skills and enabling an environment to promote community-based creative enterprises.

References

Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2003
<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00006>, last accessed in Sep, 2013

What Are the ICH Safeguarding Tasks? Voices from the Pacific Region

Akatsuki Takahashi

Program Specialist for Culture
 UNESCO Office for the Pacific States

Abstract

This paper begins with a brief introduction to the history of the Pacific region and its cultural cooperation centering on past and on-going projects, such as the Festival of Pacific Arts (FOPA), community-based Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs), and Access and Benefit-Sharing (ABS). The introduction is followed by a progress report on intangible cultural heritage (ICH) safeguarding and the promotion and implementation of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Pacific. Activities both at country and regional levels as well as those carried out in partnership with other organizations are highlighted in the progress report. The paper then presents three areas for the future tasks for ICH safeguarding in the Pacific:

- i) ICH and community resilience,
- ii) ICH and community well-being, and
- iii) ICH policy and strategy.