

## VI. Pending issues & urgent needs regarding the safeguarding of ICH

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### ***Q1. Is any of the intangible cultural heritage in your country in danger of disappearance or transformation?***

The fact that Bangladesh is a small country by area but culturally it is so varied that conducting a complete survey with a small project is very difficult, almost impossible in fact. What we have seen that many of the cultural expressions have already become extinct or on the verge of the extinction.

**a) Muslin:** Bengal has been renowned for fine muslins since ancient days. In Mughal times, merchants came from as far away as Turkey and Arabia, seeking exquisite textiles in the market of Demra, east of Dhaka. The muslins named for Dhaka were a technical marvel, carried by commerce across the world. During the early nineteenth century, British colonial policy succeeded in destroying the textile industry of Bengal, and reducing the people to poverty. Bengalis became suppliers of raw cotton and consumers of cloth woven in England. But the English mills could not produce a fabric as fine as the muslins of Dhaka. The weaving of cloth in normal grades declined abruptly, but the weaving of muslins, beyond the reach of British machines in fineness, continued. As metalwork today, when plain vessels are made by Hindus and engraved by Muslims, the textiles of the past divided by taste. Hindus wove fine, plain muslins. Muslims flowered them with embroidery or brocade. The *jamdani* will be a sari, one and a half yards wide, six yards long. Quality and cost depend on the fineness of the warp and the weight of the design. The weavers



*Jamdani- the finest hand made cloth in the world*

divide designs into light and heavy. Light designs consist of small motifs sprinkled neatly into an overall pattern. Heavy designs have larger, interconnected motifs. All leave space to display the astonishing transparency of the ground, the woven air on which brocaded motifs float, and all have rich, running borders like those of Middle Eastern carpets. According to the Master Showkat Ali, the weavers know one hundred and sixty designs. New designs have been supplied by agencies for development in Dhaka, but the weavers do not use them, unless they are pressed by special commissions. They prefer the designs they learned when they learned to weave.



During the past two centuries, the center for brocades, for the textiles called *jamdani*, has shifted north in Narayanganj district, from Sonargaon to Rupganj. Across from Demra, the village of Rupshi runs north along the eastern bank of the Shitalakshya River. The weavers there, all of them Muslims, estimate that there are two to three thousand *jamdani* looms in the region.

But the art of the weaving Jamdani is on the verge of disappearance. It's because skill of weaving were transmitting to the next generation automatically. Now new generation are not interested to learn them from their parents as it can not ensure their smooth livelihood. A good quality Jamdani needs 15 days to one moth, sometimes even more. But the wage they get for this is much more lower in comparison to other business. That is why there is a huge transformation of profession in the community of the artist of Jamdani, the proud successor of Muslin, now itself is in risk.

In fact lot of items of ICH in Bangladesh are in danger of disappearing soon unless some drastic actions are taken. These are as bellow.

- Setar (three stringed musical instrument), very few persons can now play this amazing musical instrument which must be safeguarded.
- Esraaj (stringed musical instrument), similar to Setar.
- Sarinda (stringed and bowing instrument) similar to Setar
- Vatialy, a form of folk song on the verge of disappearance.

- Dhamail, a form of folk song on the verge of disappearance
- Gambhira, a form of folk song on the verge of disappearance
- Alkap, a form of folk song on the verge of disappearance
- Jarigan, a form of folk song on the verge of disappearance
- Palagan, a form of folk song on the verge of disappearance
- Puppet show, a form of performing arts on the verge of disappearance

***Q2. What are the reasons the heritage is in danger and what type of safeguarding measures have been taken? Please be specific.***

The basic problem of lack of safeguarding awareness in Bangladesh came out during our interview with Professor Sirajul Islam, President, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh. He made the most important point so far. That is, the essence of being careless of our very rich cultural traditions lies in the very mindset of the people of Bangladesh. As it is a Muslim majority country and Islam actually downgrades the importance of worldly things and give priority on the things of the other world after death. So basically people are unaware of the preservation and protection just opposite in the western society as it is materialistic.

Secondly, the trend of globalization as it is common all over the world has a huge influence for being careless about the root of the ancestors. The young people have a general tendency to become a world citizen where there is little value of upholding your own culture. More and more people are becoming cosmopolitan day by day. Rapid transformation of the society from agrarian to urban contributes a lot in ignoring age old traditions.

Thirdly, many people don't have adequate knowledge and means of preserving various items of ICH.

So far the safeguarding measures are limited to the performance of the various forms of music and dance. Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy and Bangla Academy have taken some specific measures to conduct massive survey nationwide and at the same time to produce a complete inventory and a good number of books have been published which should be reprinted for the mass distributions. And we feel, more comprehensive study should be conducted to gather all kinds of information about safeguarding measures.

***Q3. What are the pending issues for safeguarding ICH in your country that you have found through interviews and the field survey?***

We have seen that the Institutions are not well aware of safeguarding the ICH. They need some motivational training. The existing legal instruments also need to be amended to meet the changing situations. In most cases, the Organisations are undermanned and under-equipped.

***Q4. What kind of problems and difficulties were encountered during the safeguarding projects?***

All the institutions working in the process of safeguarding were very helpful during the projects. People are very enthusiastic to do their jobs. But they have limitations in terms of human and machine capacity.

***Q5. What future plans are there for the safeguarding of ICH (programme information)?***

What we have seen that there are efforts for the safeguarding of ICH in scattered way. Sometimes they are not aware of it. Or, if they are aware they are not serious about it. If they are serious they don't have the capacities- both machine and human- to execute their plan.

To that end, we have talked to the government agencies. They have a plan to conduct at first massive awareness building programme among the stakeholders of ICH- such as policy makers, practitioners, officials in charge of safeguarding ICH in Bangladesh. They have a plan to conduct workshops and seminars and formulate policy for the better safeguarding of the ICH.

***Q6. What type of contributions and cooperation from the international society is needed for the safeguarding of ICH in your country?***

Training of the officials of the relevant Institutions/Organisations is much needed. At the same time they need motivation for performing their jobs. International society may extend their cooperation in joint venture with the Government of Bangladesh to enhance the capacity of the Institutions/Organisations who are working in the field of ICH.

***Q7. What role do you expect ICHCAP to play in the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage in the region in terms of programmes, projects, etc.?***

ICHCAP may impart their knowledge they have gained from other countries regarding the safeguarding measures of ICH. We need to complete a comprehensive inventory on ICH. ICHCAP can share their knowledge regarding this. ICHCAP can play a pivotal role to conduct National Conference for the Safeguarding of ICH in Bangladesh.

***Q8. Please include any requests and/or suggestions you have on this matter.***

ICHCAP may render project aid to launch **Living Human Treasures System (LHTS)** in Bangladesh so that we may safeguard some of the endangered elements of ICH.

***Q9. What should be considered to encourage or to ensure active involvement from the community in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage?***

Just to conduct awareness building programme among the community. It is quite universal that people don't care about safeguarding their ICH simply because it is not on their priority list. Similar is the case in Bangladesh. True safeguarding process must involve the community. They will have to see the real benefit of safeguarding their ICH.

***Conclusion***

Bangladesh is a small country by area but it is highly rich in terms of number and varieties of cultural expressions. It's because the village based society was self-sufficient and self content. So it is very difficult, almost impossible, to have complete idea about its huge varieties of cultural expressions and gather complete information by such a small project about the safeguarding measures taken by our intelligentsia throughout the years. More over we had time constraint to conduct the survey. Still we think that the findings of this project will be vital for future activities in the field of ICH in Bangladesh-whether it is launched by the Government or other International Organisations.