

V. Intangible Cultural Heritage in Nepal

1. Introduction

Nepal is popularly known as the birthplace of Lord Buddha, the Light of Asia with a long historical tradition. The cultural heritage of Nepal stretches back over two thousand five hundred years. It embraces two major religious traditions, the Hindu and the Buddhist, which have flourished in one of the world's most dramatic natural environments. As Buddhism and Hinduism developed and changed over the centuries throughout Asia, Nepal profited from its unique position between Tibet, China to the north and India to the south. Both religions prospered in Nepal and produced a powerful cultural fusion, beginning at least from the first century AD. Nepal has an extremely rich cultural heritage. During its long and glorious history, it has preserved its ancient culture. The importance of Nepal's vast heritage of historic buildings, works of art, documentary heritage and ICH is renewed throughout the world. Nepal is a country, deeply rooted in its great cultural heritage and committed to the noble task of preserving it for the benefit of all mankind.

Nepal is rich in both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Nepal is also a country of cultural diversity, over hundreds ethnic groups with their own distinct culture, language and religious identity live in Nepal. Nepal is also rich country of traditional folk performing art and other intangible cultural heritage. Nepal is known for its wonderfully rich and varied corpus of traditional culture and folklore. Nepal is a developing country, but also a country deeply rooted in its great cultural heritage and committed to the noble task of preserving it for the benefit of all mankind.

The Tibetan speaking people of Mongol origin live in the Mountain regions of the north. Immediately south of the Mountain are attractive valleys, hills, various Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan language speaking and origin people inhabit this region. Similarly Indo-Aryans origin people live in the Terai from time immemorial from time with few exceptions the majority of people live in the certain well-define, specific geographical region.

In Nepal folk dance, music and songs are the part of life of the people. These diverse cultures are the wealth of the nation as they give a distinct identity of the country.

In Nepal every single group speaks different language and dialect; some of them have their own scripts too. Each group has developed its own marriage and social rules and become ethnocentric in almost every respect. When Prithvi Narayan Shah, King of Gorkha defeated the smaller warring principalities and brought them together to form one united Nepal during the middle of the 18th century, he was impelled to say that his hard earned country was a garden for all types of people. Thus Nepal is the land of different ethnic groups scattered through out the country. Each ethnic group has its own social and cultural norms and tradition. Each Nepalese caste has its own religion, ideas, beliefs, traditions, taboos, rituals, ceremonies, fairs and festivals, customs, folk song and dance, musical instruments, dress and ornaments.

Centuries old tradition and culture-based dance, music, songs are prevalent in various parts of Nepal even today. In Nepal folk dances, songs and music are the part of the life of particularly rural people. Ritualistic element is also evident in folk/traditional dance and music of the country. Most of the folk performing arts are generally drawn from mythology and ancient scriptures. This has been carried through centuries from generation to generation by oral tradition and these cultural heritages are still alive and active in people's social life.

Historically, they are references of various elements of the Intangible Cultural Heritage such as- festivals, religious hymns, secular songs and dances, language and scripts and other forms of performing arts in Nepal from ancient time. Early medieval and medieval period are very much rich in this regard, particularly in Kathmandu valley. There are a series of evidence of unique folk performing arts in different parts of the country, which are still survived. This Intangible Heritage is still alive and active in our people's social life.

As far as cultural diversities are concerned, Nepal is well known in the world for her rich culture and traditional history that has been practiced since time immemories. Each community in Nepal has its distinct culture. The outstanding feature portrayed by every culture has made them unique and discernible. Nepal's rich cultural diversity is thus manifested in various shapes and forms.

2. ICH: a definition by the UNESCO Convention

The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was adopted by the General Conferences of UNESCO in Paris in 2003 at its 32nd session. This is the one and only convention, which deals with the Intangible Cultural Heritage in international level. According to this convention, the intangible cultural heritage- or living heritage- is the mainspring of our cultural diversity and its maintenance a guarantee for continuing creativity.

The convention has defined the 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' as follow-

"The 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' means the practices, representation, expressions, knowledge, skills-as well as the instruments, object, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith- that communities, groups and in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. The 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 for the purpose of this convention consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals and of sustainable development."

The convention states that the ICH is manifested, among others, in the following domains;

- Oral tradition and expressions including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage;
- Performing arts (such as traditional music, dance and theatre);
- Social practices, ritual and festive events;
- Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;
- Traditional craftsmanship;

3. Five Domain of ICH in the Nepalese Context

The oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage is the cultural identity and features of the people and they are the creativity of the man. Culture and tradition is the way of life of people lead in a particular society and in the same society various community do follow different sets of practices as a part of their culture and tradition, which is handed down one generation to next. This is how culture lives on through the ages. The chief elements which keep culture and tradition going are language, clothing, songs, dance, literature, painting and so on. These elements do play vital role to keep different forms of culture practices and tradition alive and kicking in the society. It is the totality of tradition based creation of a cultural community, expressed by a groups or individuals and recognized as reflecting the expectations of a community in so far as they reflect its cultural and social identity, its standards and values are transmitted orally, by imitation or by other means. Its forms are, among others, mythology, rituals, customs, handicrafts and other forms of arts.

This is a fairly new term and concept in the Nepalese context. It has not yet been defined legally or academically till date. In the context of Nepal as defined by UNESCO ICH Convention, however almost of all elements of the ICH was discussed under the general term of "Folklore" by some scholars. Since Nepal became the state party of the purpose of convention in 2010, it is essential for us to define the term ICH legally or academically and at present Government of Nepal is in the process to carry out this job. But for the purpose of paper here we will discuss some of the significant elements of Nepalese ICH in general under the five domain of ICH as define by the UNESCO Convention.

A. Oral traditions and expressions including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage

Oral tradition is also one of the important sources of history and culture. One can see the social cultural and historical value of the country in the oral tradition. Thus oral tradition is the earliest form of documentation of records. Before the art of writing development, the records of any nation, may it be political, social or religious are recorded in memory. There were memorizers who memorize any event by hard and keep it from one mouth to another from generation to generation. As for example 'The Vedas', earliest Vedic literature, is preserved from one mouth to another and after the discovery of script it was compiled in written form. Thus before the development of art of writing the oral tradition was the only one medium to document the man's past history. In the process of learning men development the art of writing or script with the development of this new technique the practice of recording the events was started through inscribing either in clay, stone, copper or paper.

Nepal is very rich in oral tradition. Its impact can be seen in very aspect of people's life. In the context of Nepal oral tradition is treated as one of the important sources material for the reconstruction of our history prior to 5th century AD with expectation of Lumbini and Niglihawa pillar inscription Emperor Asoka.

The oral tradition is preserved in Nepalese Vamsabalis (chronicles). They states that Kathmandu valley was in the form of a lake before it was fit for human habitation. According to the Buddhist text it was Manjushri Bodhisattva who cut the gorge at Chovar, drained the water out and made the valley fit for habitation. Another story states that God Krishna, who cut the gorge at Chovar, drained the water out. The story of Kathmandu valley being lake is also confirmed by the geological study of the valley. Oral tradition is also one of the important sources of Nepalese history. We can observe the social, cultural and historical value of the country in the oral tradition.

Language is a human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, feelings and process desires by means of a system of sound symbols. It is the outstanding discovery of man during its evolution.

Nepal is a multi-ethnic country with diverse language, religions and cultural tradition since time immemories. Each ethnic community has their own language.

“In Nepal, the language of people is recorded in terms of their reported mother tongue. According to the census definition, a mother tongue is the one that is spoken by a person in childhood. The 2002 census provided detailed on 92 language groups. According to the 2002 census, the Nepali language speakers are recorded as 48.611 of the total population, followed by Maithili (12.30%), Bhojpuri (7.53%), Tharu (5.86 %), Tamang (5.19%), Newari (3.63%), Magar (3.39%), Awadhi (2.47%), Bantawa (1.63%), Gurung (1.49%), Limbu (1.47%), Bajika (1.05%). The remaining 80 languages are spoken by less than 1% of the total population of Nepal and represent the small socio cultural groups. Some of these languages are in danger and some are in potential danger of disappearing. (Dilli R. Dahal “Cultural and Religious Diversity: Dialogue and Development” P.17)

The languages spoken in Nepal belong to four language families: Indo Aryan (79.1%), Tibeto-Burman (18.4%), Austro-Asiatic (Munda) and Dravidian (0.30%). The people who did not provide information about their language are the 2.2% of the total population in Nepal (Yadav 2003)

B. Performing arts

Nepal inhabited by various indigenous ethnic groups is very renowned for its folk performing arts. Century's old tradition and culture based dances, music and songs are prevalent on various part of Nepal even today. Most of the folk performing arts of Nepal are generally drawn from mythology and ancient scripture. These ethnic groups particularly Newars, Brahman, Chhetris, Gurang, Sherpa, Magars, Kirat, Tamang, Tharu, Rajvamshi as extra play very important role for the development and keep this folk performing arts alive in the different region of the country with distinct local and ethnic identity. Each ethnic communities of Nepal have developed their own folk performing arts. On the basis of subject matter, nature and style the folk performing art of the country can be divided into different groups; dances, songs and music related to worship, related to historical events, related to purely entertainment, related to sacrament and ritual and so on. Dances, songs and music related to worship or dedicated to different god and goddesses. In the religious dances, symbolically they worked as a communicator between gods and human beings.

The Ghatu performed by the Gurung is a historical dance related to the historical events and some extent religious too. The Chudka and Kaura dances performed by Magars, Gurung and other ethnic groups of Gandaki region are the dances related to the entertainment. Dohori, the very popular folk song performed by almost all ethnic groups of the different part of the country is a very popular duet related to the entertainment of the peoples. Dohori, the extremely Nepalese folk flavor song is collectively created by different ethnic groups of the country. In this indigenous style of alternating singing song, between boys and girls, the artists can sing hundreds of pieces of songs about feeling of love, romance, grief and appreciation of boys and girls appearance.

There are other very popular several folk songs and dances performed by different ethnic groups of the country. There are also songs or the seasons of the year. Asare Geet (rice transplantation song) is another special type of songs, which is sung in the month of Asar (June-July) during the rice transplantation season through out the mid-hill region of the country including the Kathmandu valley. Gaine is the very popular song. These traditions can be observed in the daily life of the people of this region. Particularly in songs, dances and music's and these all are the examples of folk performing arts with uniquely distinct live features. In this region the dance and songs are the integral part of the people in several societies.

The wording of the stories and subject matter of the entertainment oriented songs such as; Kaura, Chudka, Dohori, Asare and other folk songs are feelings of love, romance, and grief and sometimes they repeatedly praise various details of woman or girl's appearance. They express their happiness and woe through the medium of folk song and dance. Their level of suffering and happiness is best expressed in their folklores. They do, however, overlap as regards subject matter and function, at the same time, these songs also touch open topic of the widest diversity. Whereas, story behind some songs and dances are found based on historical events and tragedy in nature. There are many purpose of such dance, song and some has spiritual purpose for pleasing the gods and goddess.

C. Social practices, rituals and festive events

Nepal is the land of different ethnic groups scattered through the country. Nepal is a country of diversity having over 100 ethnic groups with their own distinct culture, social practices, rituals and festive identity. Every single group has developed its own marriage and social rules and become ethnocentric in almost every respect. Each ethnic group has its own social and cultural norms and tradition, which developed under the Hindu and Buddhist religious background. Every Nepalese caste has its own religion, ideas, beliefs, traditions, taboos, rituals, ceremonies, fairs and festivals, customs.

Centuries old traditions and culture-based activities are prevalent in various parts of Nepal, even today. Nepal observes quite a number of festivals and one can always witness either festival or Jatra through the year. Most of Nepalese festivals originated several centuries ago and their celebrations have been in vogue through the ages.

Different ethnic groups observe same festivals in their own way and so points of contrast become remarkably visible. The styles and patterns are also very peculiar typical and characteristic, thus producing a very fascinating picture. The festivals of Nepal are not only very colorful and mysterious but also involve very long preparations. Generally majority of the festivals have religious, cultural, social and educational character. The major religious festivals, with a few exceptions are annual.

Worshipping of Gods is an integral part of the festivals and rituals. Worshipping is an important form of ritual. Rituals of worship have a physical and psychological effect. Thus two functions of worship are not separable. With the help of sounds, forms rhythms, gestures, flowers, light, incense and offering, the mind of a worshipper is carried away from its material preoccupations towards a world of divine beauty. The deity enchanted also come closer to the worshipper. The technique and ritual of worship facilitate the contacts with deities. Worshipping is done with flowers, holy water and offerings. The most important features of worship are purification of the body of worshippers.

Thus social practices, rituals, festivals and worshipping of Gods and goddesses are an integral part of the Nepalese intangible cultural heritage. It is therefore, without a study of her festivals, religious practices and rituals of different ethnic groups, the study of Nepalese tangible as well as intangible cultural heritage will ever remain incomplete.

D. Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe

The Hindu believes that the whole world is their family and believes in the divine origin of creation. They also believe that deities govern the functions of the universe. According to their belief, there is nothing in the universe this is not of divine nature. Hindu believes that lord Shiva residing in Mount Kailash brought in the first dawn of creation.

E. Traditional Craftsmanship

The history of crafts in the forms of art and architecture is very old tradition in Nepal. A good number of masterpieces of stone sculptures and copper coins are available in and around the Kathmandu valley belong to Lichhavi period. During the mediaeval period, several impressive royal residences temples and other architectural monuments,

different forms of art objects were built at different time in and around the Kathmandu valley. The Malla dynasty (1200 – 1768 AD) was considered as the golden period for the art and architectural point of view. The monument of that period have preserved a wide variety of art and architectural styles, each different type of art and architecture have their own distinctive character and utility, but is linked with one other by common ties of technique and material. These art and architectural monuments are generally made of stone, brick, clay, bronze and timber. The significant contribution of this period is the bronze casting and wood carvings with high standard.

Thus different forms of craftsmanship are deeply rooted in Nepalese society and culture. The great skills, passed on from generation to generation, allow the craftsmen to produce the finest hand crafted goods. Traditional handicraft is entirely based on the mobilization of local resources, skill and labor. The tools and technologies for making these crafts and the designs are often unaltered in spite of the advent of new technologies.

The different forms of craftsmanship displaying exotic craftsmanship are divided into metal, wooden and stone images and other varieties of crafts of Hindu and Buddhist sects and articles of daily use-clay products, cotton hand loom products made of bamboo and cave, leather products and so on are the other very important products of Nepalese crafts.

Metal-crafts have a very old history in Nepal and thus are very well developed. The 5th century coins to images and statues of medieval period displayed in different museums and temples, which gives testimony to the fact that it has been a part of Nepalese way of life for longtime. Wooden crafts of Nepal are very famous. They are not only well known of the intricacy of the carvings but also for their social and religious importance.

There is no special training courses conducted by concerned institutions for the new artists but the training in traditional craftsmanship or skills has been through “learning by doing”. This approach is, in fact, in line with the prevailing traditional system of interfamily and inter-caste training of traditional skills from the older by working with them. The traditional handicrafts workshop to be a most useful center of learning, disseminating the practical knowledge and experience. Nepal even today has mostly retained the traditional caste-bound family skills and craftsmanship. The skills and craftsmanship transfer is interfamily and inter-caste affair and normally takes place in a closed circle.

It was the general feeling among the craft families that their traditional skill was no longer useful in the changing socio-economic context of the country. But because of the big demand of handicrafts goods proved that their talent is still very much in demand.