

Involvement of communities in defining, inventorying and safeguarding their ICH

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Background

The Royal Government of Bhutan has pursued the strengthening of the age long traditions and practices under various programme elements that are implemented separately or through collaboration virtually by all the ministries and agencies in both the public and private sectors. Utmost care has been rendered while designing the country's plan for modern economic, social and technological development so that it does not impair its traditional and cultural values. Preservation and promotion of cultural practices is a top priority of the Royal Government of Bhutan as it is defined as an important element of Bhutanese identity in the global race of development.

Safeguarding measures

Bhutan's cultural heritage not only covers historical sites, art and craft, performing arts; but also architecture, sports, and folklore. Part of our heritage is embedded in rich oral traditions. All the practices under the cultural heritage fall under any one of the following categories:

1. Institutionalization
2. Patronization by central and locals
3. Individuals

1. Institutionalization

Some of the ICH which are of national importance and do not necessarily belong to a particular region are institutionalized by different centres and institutes which are usually supported by the state. The Royal Academy for Performing Arts (Home and Cultural Affairs Ministry), the Institute of Language and Culture Studies (The Royal University of Bhutan), the School of Arts and Craft (Home and Cultural Affairs Ministry), the Rigney¹ School (Education Ministry) are some of the prominent centres where formal courses are offered as part of the promotion and preservation initiative of the government. Every year hundreds of students graduate from these institutes.

Some of the cultural practices are either included into the broad general school curriculum across the kingdom or introduced as an extra-curricular subject. Effort is made to make them understand and appreciate the relevance of culture and traditions to the development of the individual and make them realize that they are the custodians of a distinct culture.

¹ Traditional Sciences

2. Patronization by central and locals

The district headquarters have patronized some of the local practices and is organized every year in the form of a local festival. The monastic body of the district headquarter is entrusted with the responsibility of organizing the rituals. Many such practices have either gained local patronages or are in the process of considering. The government in different levels have been introducing new festivals where there hasn't been one before. This has given the local practitioners not only a forum to exhibit their skills and talent but also to conduct training sessions to the younger generation.

In the local community centres, such as the community Lhakhang², the rituals of the festivals are organized by the community members themselves through contributions and performed by themselves. The magnitude of its importance is estimated when such festivals receive official attention in the form of holidays declared by the local governments.

3. Individuals

Some practices are related to a specific region or a place. The art is either passed down from generation to generation or transmitted from a chain of teachers to disciples. Whether the tradition bearer is an individual or a group, the art belongs to the community. While most of the rituals performed by a group represent the larger context of the community but even if the art is performed by an individual it is still receives the same treatment but it is commissioned only in private households for the individual purposes.

Community involvement in all spheres

All the local traditions are either being studied or recorded and documented in different formats by involving the local practitioners and elders. This has led to the active participation of the practitioners in giving right information. They feel proud to be associated with their local practice. Some practitioners are invited to different training centres and are some are entrusted the responsibility to teach in different schools.

The community headed by the village head decides on the fate of their local practices. They make internal arrangements within the community to plan for the future sustainability of the practice but if the safeguarding measures are prohibitively money intensive they appeal the local governments for financial aid. The government encourages the communities to draw up their own 5 year plan and consecutive annual plans based on the broad 5 year plan for all sorts of developments in the community which is inclusive of culture component.

² A Temple where the community people perform their religious rituals and conduct celebrations. It is either owned by the community themselves or partly supported by the local government but taken care by the community

The awareness of the importance of safeguarding the local practices has made people more committed to patronize the practices through different community participation. People staying in other parts of the country, are required to return to their community during the time of some of these festivals. Some communities have started a society of civil servants and created a welfare fund scheme for this kind of rituals and celebrations by making monthly contributions. All expenses are borne by those who earn salaries and the local community offers labour services in arranging the celebrations.

Conclusion

If there is a strong political will at the government level and if the communities attach high priority for its cultural heritage and where the age long culture is a living manifestation of its people, the posterity of ICH is definite to see through aeons.