

International Partnership Programme for Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage  
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**Case Study Report: India**  
**IGNCA Project to Safeguard and Revitalise ICH**

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**1. Background**

Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts is a premier national repository of knowledge in the field of cultural heritage of the country. It has over the years built up a huge cultural archive comprising audio recordings, audio visual documentation, photographs, ethnographic films, CD ROMS, field data and research monographs based on field surveys and studies. The approach of the Centre is multidisciplinary and through its diverse programmes of research, publication, training, field studies and multimedia presentations, IGNCA seeks to place the cultural heritage within the context of the natural and socio-economic environment. Thrust of the multidimensional activities of the Centre is to safeguard, preserve, disseminate and revitalise the rich variegated heritage of India including lifestyles, knowledge systems and art practices of indigenous communities. It provides a platform for critical and creative dialogue between scholars, artists, policy makers and bearers of tradition by holding regular workshops, conferences and seminars. Over the years IGNCA has developed a huge databank available through intra and internet facilities. Its efforts at revitalisation of indigenous practices are aimed towards both local and national level initiatives. The presentation focuses on one such recent effort to safeguard and revitalise a hitherto unknown and almost extinct tradition in the Central Himalayan region of the country, namely the religious festival and ritual theatre, Ramman in the Garhwal Himalayas.

Target ICH- Ramman: Religious Festival and Ritual Theatre of the Garhwal Himalayas, India.

*Introduction:* Ramman is a religious festival celebrated every year in the twin villages of Saloor Dungra in Painkhanda valley of Garhwal region to propitiate the village deity Bhumichetrapal, also known as Bhumiya Devta. Historical accounts of the preexisting tradition since 1911 are available, but the tradition has existed prior to this. The documents available with the community historically attest that the tradition has existed for more than a hundred years. The celebration of Ramman coincides with another festival known as *Baisakhi* which falls on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the solar month of April. *Baisakhi* is a harvest festival and also the beginning of the Hindu Solar New Year. Every year on this day the village priest traditionally announces the date for the Ramman festival which invariably falls on the ninth or the eleventh day after *Baisakhi*. The festival lasts for ten days and throughout this period, the local epic of Rama is sung and masked dances depicting different aspects of life take place in the courtyard of the Bhumiya Devta's temple. Beginning with the dance of the Sun-God, performance moves on to other deities and characters. The performers make use of elaborate costumes and masks. Another important aspect of the performance is the singing of *Jagar*, a musical rendition of local legends. The performance combines the celestial, social and historical aspects in a comic and humorous presentation, though never losing sight of the spiritual.

These performances are not only meant to propitiate the deities, but the deities themselves appear in the performance as actual dramatis personae with specific roles. Ramman also bears a clear link with the historical memory of the community, which is enacted in one of the main episodes of the performance. In this episode, a battle between two warring sides, the Gurkhas of Nepal and the Garhwalis, is enacted in a hilarious manner ending in the comic defeat of the Gurkhas.

The performance ends with an event that depicts the popular legend associated with the incarnation of one of the Hindu gods as Narsimha (half man- half lion) and his child devotee, Bhagat Prahlaad. This is enacted beautifully through a dance performed on 18 beats in different permutations and combinations.

Ramman is an amazing cluster of performances, with multiple narratives and musical texts, costumes and masks, innovative organisation of theatrical space and mode of presentation grouped together in a single ritual-performance complex. Ramman is more than a theatrical presentation; it is an ecological, spiritual, social and historical expression of the community.

On the first day of the festival, a procession of Bhumiyal devta is taken out and he is brought from his place of residence (which is one of the houses in the village) to the central temple complex accompanied by beating of drums and masked dances. After the festivity comes to a close for the year, Bhumiyal Devta goes to live in one of the houses for the entire year till the next *Baisakhi* festival. His place of residence in the village is decided by the Village Panchayat.

On the second day of the festival, people offer *hariyali*, (newly sprouted barley plants) to the deity, which has an obvious agrarian and ecological reference. The ritual and theatrical performances which accompany the festival are well planned, regulated and thoroughly organised. The main components of performances are as follows:

#### **Celestial**

- The dance of the Sun–God: enactment of the creation- myth and birth of Brahma and Ganesh.
- Dance of deities, Ganesh and Kalinki (Parvati)
- Bur Deva ( Sage Narad) and Rani- Radhika, the consort of Hindu god Krishna
- Gopi Chand ( Krishna), Rani Radhika and *gopis* (Krishna’s playmates) Nritya

#### **Temporal**

- Mwar-Mwarin Dance: Mwar-Mwarin is representative of a buffalo-herding jungle tribe. The dance portrays the travails of a hazardous journey of milk-sellers on their way to the hills from the plains to sell milk. It also portrays the dangers faced by the tribals from wild animals in their daily lives. This is depicted through a scene that shows a tiger attacking the milk seller and injuring him seriously.
- Baniya-Baniyan Nritya (Dance of the trader couple): The focus is once again on hardships faced by common people in their daily life, especially while travelling. Episode shows the robbers attacking and robbing the merchant couple.

#### **Epic Tradition**

The performance now shifts towards an enactment of the local Ramkatha, the Rama story.

- This performance forms the core of the entire event. Episodes from Rama's life are sung and danced. The dance is performed on 18 different beats with different mutations and combinations danced 18 times, thus yielding a total number of 324 beats and steps. The episodes enacted and sung here are as follows:
- Visit of Ram-Lakshman to Janakpur
- Sita's Swyamwar (Sita's marriage)
- Hanuman Milan (The meeting with the monkey god)
- Swarna Mrig Vadh (Killing of Golden Deer)
- Sita Haran (Abduction of Sita)
- Lanka Dahan (Burning of Lanka)
- Raj Tilak (Coronation ceremony)
- Apart from these, performances such as Maal Nritya, Koorjogi, Narsingh Pattar Nritya constitute an important part of the Ramman.

### **Historical Aspect**

*Maal Nritya*: After the Rama story, the performance moves on to the historical battle between the Gurkhas and Garhwalis. This is portrayed through Maal Nritya in which two dancers each from opposite directions, east and west, move on to the central performing arena enacting a battle scene. They appear comic in their looks, attire and gestures. Carrying weapons in their hands they enact martial moves.

### **Ecological Aspect**

*Koorjogi*: This episode is of immense ecological relevance. Various harmful weeds and grasses found in the village fields are pulled out during the festival. *Koorjogi* is the name of the character that carries a sack full of these weeds; *Koor* is a type of harmful weed. Episode involving him portrays their destruction. This is one of the most joyous moments when people throw these thorny weeds on each other creating goodwill mayhem and establishing a communitas between different sections of the society.

*Make-up of Artists*: Ramman Performance involves use of elaborate makeup and masks. The ingredients used are natural herbs, sheep's wool, honey, vermilion, wheat flour, oil, turmeric, soot and locally grown plants and vegetables.

*Masks*: are made from wood taken from locally grown trees. It involves a lengthy ritual process, months of curing, painting and bringing alive of the masks. Mask makers are local artists.

### **Musical Aspect**

*Drumming Tradition*: Drums play an important part of the entire performance, without their beats and rhythms no performance is possible as the steps move according to the beat rather than the other way round. The drums are played by traditional artists who belong to the lowermost rung of the community. They become ritually empowered during the performance and without their presence, no performance can take place. They are called Das and also auji. All Das families in the village come to the temple with their drums, flutes and cymbals to perform collectively. They also correct and mediate the dance steps of the actors when the latter fail to keep to the beat or the rhythm.

*Jagar Tradition:* Singing of local oral legends and mythical narratives by community bards throughout the performance is an essential part of the tradition. These narrative poems are known as Jagars and are chanted in honour of specific deities and local culture.

#### *Community Feasts*

The festival ends with a feast where the *Prasaad* of the deity is distributed to every single member of the community.

Though the aesthetic and artistic aspects of Ramman have been less acknowledged than the spiritual, as an art form Ramman is total theatre with the unique distinction of combining the religious, ritual, customary, social and historical with the art forms: oral, literary, visual, kinetic and traditional craft. These have co-existed in a lively relationship of exchange and interaction for more than a hundred years. It is in this complex pattern of the tradition that one can understand its true nature and role in the art and in the ideals and values of the people of the Indian sub-continent in general and Garhwal region in particular where this festival is celebrated with enthusiasm. It is one of the rare performing traditions in the region which combines within it the indigenous and pan Indian, the folk and classical, the oral and textual, adapting it to local aesthetic and spiritual aspirations of the community. What makes the Ramman extraordinary is the gamut of feelings and emotions that cause the community to experience a unique cultural and historical identity.

## **2. Objective of the Project**

The tradition of Ramman was on the verge of extinction and little known outside its immediate locale when IGNCA made its first intervention to document and safeguard it. The main objectives of the IGNCA's initiative were to safeguard the tradition from complete extinction, to revitalise it and keep it alive for the future generations, and register it in the cognitive cultural map of the country. It also focused on the aesthetic performing traditions associated with the festival with an aim to provide a wider public domain for its showcasing and making it competitive with the more professional performing arts traditions. Safeguarding efforts also aimed at a thorough documentation of associated songs, dance movements, making of masks, costumes, drumming tradition, and various legends and mythical tales enacted during the festival with a view to creating a resource bank for the community and the artists to draw upon.

## **3. Methods of Project Implementation**

The present project was taken up in 2007 and was linked with a larger project of the IGNCA to document and research folk and tribal traditions of India's well known epic, the Ramayana. The first step was to network with scholars and institutions both at local and national levels to prepare a working inventory of such traditions. The next step was to conduct an actual field survey to get first hand information regarding the actual state of their existence in the community. One such survey led us to the twin villages of Saloor Dugra in the Garhwal region of Central Himalayas. The inhabitants told us that though the festival is still celebrated, the performing traditions are almost forgotten and barring a few senior members of the community no one remembers the dances or the songs. There was not enough money to make new masks; the old ones were being eaten up by termites. The younger generation was not interested in learning or keeping the tradition alive. They were more attracted to the newer forms of entertainment. There were barely six singers left in the entire region who knew the songs and episodes in their entirety. The

younger generation among the drummers was not interested in playing the drums anymore since there was not enough money in the profession and due to the fact that it also carried a caste stigma. The youth looked at it as a relic of backwardness as it did not enjoy the same status as urban forms of theatre.

The first task therefore was to conduct an awareness campaign among the community, especially among its educated youth, about the immense value of the tradition at many levels; as a mark of the community's self-identity, as a storehouse of its historical memory and knowledge tradition, as an aesthetic tradition of great value and potential. We were fortunate to find support among the elders and certain sections in the youth who took upon themselves the task of starting a campaign to revitalise the tradition, to learn the intricate dance steps and locate the singers.

After a small workshop, the IGNCA invited the community to perform in Delhi. Ritual sanctions were obtained from the priests and the village elders. The centre helped them financially and allocated funds for costumes, masks and rehearsals. A successful performance in Delhi generated a lot of excitement among the community, and interest in the form among the State. The performance got reported in national and local newspapers and television. Such a reception to Ramman served to reestablish the self-esteem of the community and a sense of apathy gave way to a genuine pride in the tradition. The youth now took upon itself to learn the dances and songs, the texts of the dance-drama from the senior members. They eagerly awaited the next season of Ramman festival.

The traditional mask-makers were sought out and new masks were ordered. Evenings were devoted to rigorous training. Messages were sent to find the willing singers of Ramman in the region. Committees were formed to collect funds. Small invitation fliers were printed and sent across different parts of the region. The Ramman festival was thus once again celebrated in its full form with all the performances and singing of oral legends and myths accompanied by the beats of Himalayan drums.

The next step was to document the tradition. The IGNCA sent its professionals as well as hiring a local team to audio-visually document the entire festival. The singers were interviewed at length. The drummers were documented separately and interviews with senior drummers were recorded. Material is now being edited and will be made available online. A DVD is also in progress.

#### **4. Outcome of the Project**

However, it was equally important to provide a larger cultural space for a long-term survival of the associated performances and for this reason it became pertinent to make it compete with more modern performance traditions without distorting the very tradition in the process. The community selected a core group of young talented youth and, accompanied by senior artists, they went through a rigorous training workshop under the guidance of a professional theatre director whose only intervention was to coordinate the steps and train them to perform in a space much smaller than their original village space. Also the day-long performance had to be curtailed within a span of an hour or so. The artists themselves moulded their acts and steps to suit the demands of a different cultural space. They performed to a huge Delhi audience once again but

to showcase a relic not of an almost forgotten tradition, but of a vibrant living form. Ramman had truly arrived on the cognitive and cultural map.

## **5. Conclusion**

However, the true tribute was to come later. On the recommendation of the IGNCA, the Government of India selected Ramman for nomination to the UNESCO's representative list of ICH. The subsidiary body of UNESCO has now recommended Ramman to the Inter Governmental committee for its nomination to the list. The Ramman is a success journey of a near-extinct form from local to global arena. What made it possible was the support of the community to the State's efforts to safeguard it and revitalise it in its traditional cultural space as well as its willingness to experiment with and adapt it to new performing spaces.